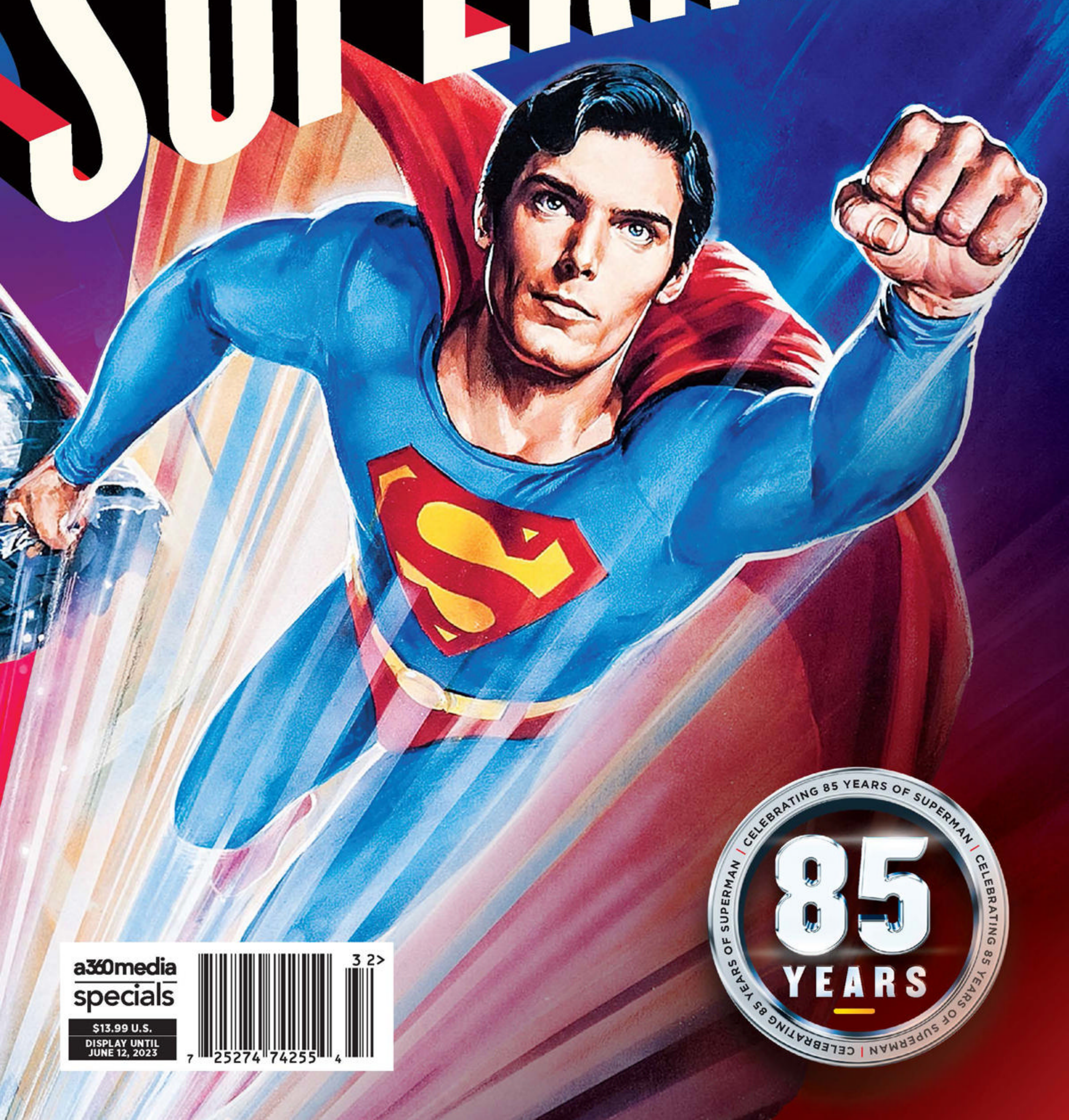
THE STORY OF
SUPERMAN



CELEBRATING 85 YEARS OF SUPERMAN | CELEBRATING 85 YEARS OF SUPERMAN | CELEBRATING 85 YEARS OF SUPERMAN |

85
YEARS

a360media
specials

$13.99 U.S.
DISPLAY UNTIL
JUNE 12, 2023

3 2>
7 25274 74255 4

VISIT…

LANZAROTE Caliente.COM

THE STORY OF
SUPERMAN

CONTENTS

6. INTRODUCTION: WHY WE LOVE SUPERMAN
Superman is the first comic book superhero and one of the most successful pop-culture properties of all time

8. CHAPTER 1: DAWN OF THE SUPERHERO
Superman wasn't just the greatest comic book superhero—he was the first

10. EARTHLY ORIGINS
His creators wanted to escape real-world worries

20. UP, UP AND AWAY
Superman soon gained pop-culture prominence

30. HITTING NEW HEIGHTS
Superman made the leap to live-action stardom

40. CHAPTER 2: AN AMERICAN ICON
Superman became even more powerful in the 1960s and '70s

42. REIGNING SUPREME
A creative burst kept him at the forefront

52. CHANGING TIMES
He faced stiff competition—and a transition

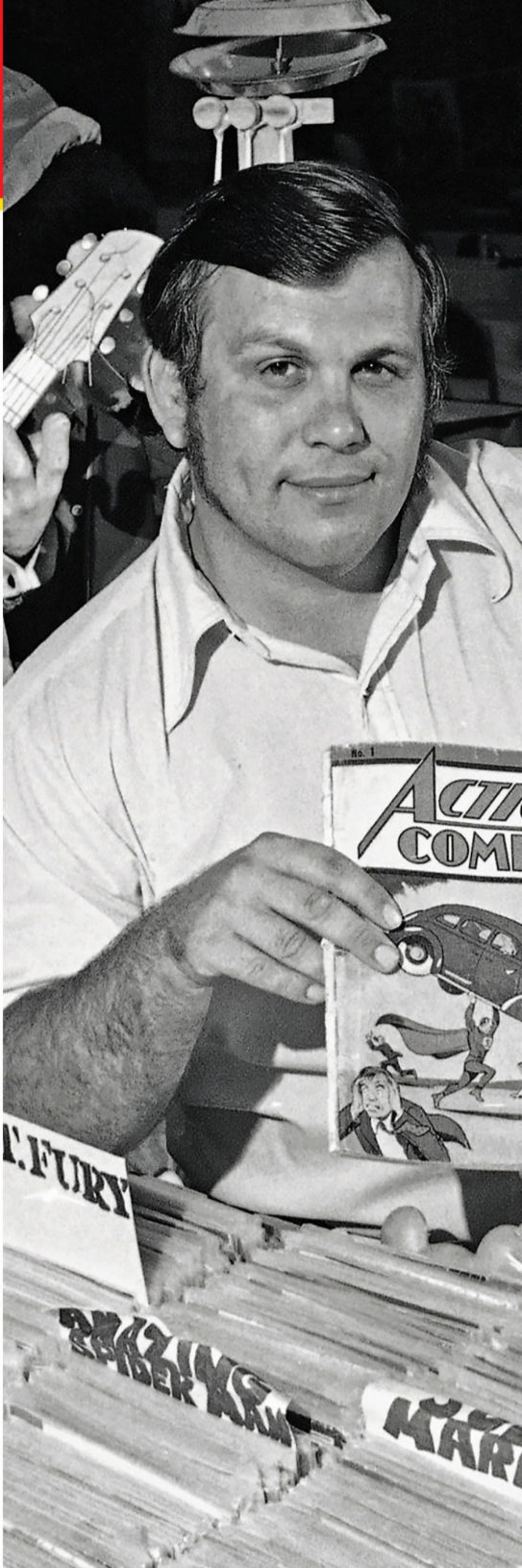
62. HOLLYWOOD...*AND* BUST
He soared at the movies, then crashed back to Earth

72. CHAPTER 3: SUPERMAN TODAY
Evolving the iconic Man of Steel has been an ongoing process

74. REMAKING THE MYTH
Superman's history got a big overhaul in the 1980s

82. THE NEVER-ENDING BATTLE
Superman's struggle to remain relevant

90. THE HERO FOR HOPE
Why we need Superman now, more than ever



COLLECTOR'S ITEMS
Two comic book collectors show off their *Action Comics* No. 1 and *Superman* No. 1.

JUNE, 1938
ION
ICS
10¢
SUPERMAN
64 PAGES of ACTION
ALL IN FULL COLOR
THE COMPLETE STORY OF THE DARING EXPLOITS OF THE ONE AND ONLY SUPERMAN
NER'

WHY WE LOVE SUPERMAN

The reason is simple: It's because he's our friend

Boiled down to the most basic description, Superman is the first comic book superhero, the template for all of the costumed crimefighters that followed him, and one of the most successful pop-culture properties of all time. With the passage of time, he's also evolved into a symbol of many things, some of which we question.

To some, Superman represents the magic and power of imagination, having been created during the Great Depression by two poor, Jewish, teenage boys who shared a love of science fiction and a dream of producing their own successful comic strip. Together, they gave the world an icon of pure heroism and goodness.

To others, Superman is an allegory of the immigrant experience, the story of an alien from another world who achieves greatness in his adopted homeland.

Yet others see him as a clever amalgamation of heroic figures and tropes from myths and legends, mixed together into a concept that felt fresh and new when he was first introduced and is now thought of as the gold standard—a concept that has often been copied but never topped.

To the late actor Christopher Reeve, Superman was something even more meaningful.

Reeve was one of the people in the world who knew the Man of Steel best, having played him in four movies between 1978 and 1987. He considered the role a great responsibility—one that he felt privileged to bear. From Reeve's perspective, the core of Superman could be summed up in two words: "A friend. That's what people really need most," he explained in an interview promoting his final performance as the superhero. "That's the heart of Superman—the genuine love of people and that you always know he's your friend."

Having been around since 1938 and served as a model of morality, altruism and compassion for several generations, Superman is not just an old friend—he's one of our very best.

HERO WORSHIP
Christopher Reeve (right, in 1983's *Superman III*) knew the character better than most.

CHAPTER 1

DAWN OF THE SUPERHERO

Superman wasn't just the greatest comic book superhero—he was the first

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK
Superman has been fighting for the underdog and saving Lois Lane almost from the very beginning.

CHAPTER 1

DAWN OF THE SUPERHERO

EARTHLY ORIGINS

Superman's creators used their collaborations to escape real-world worries

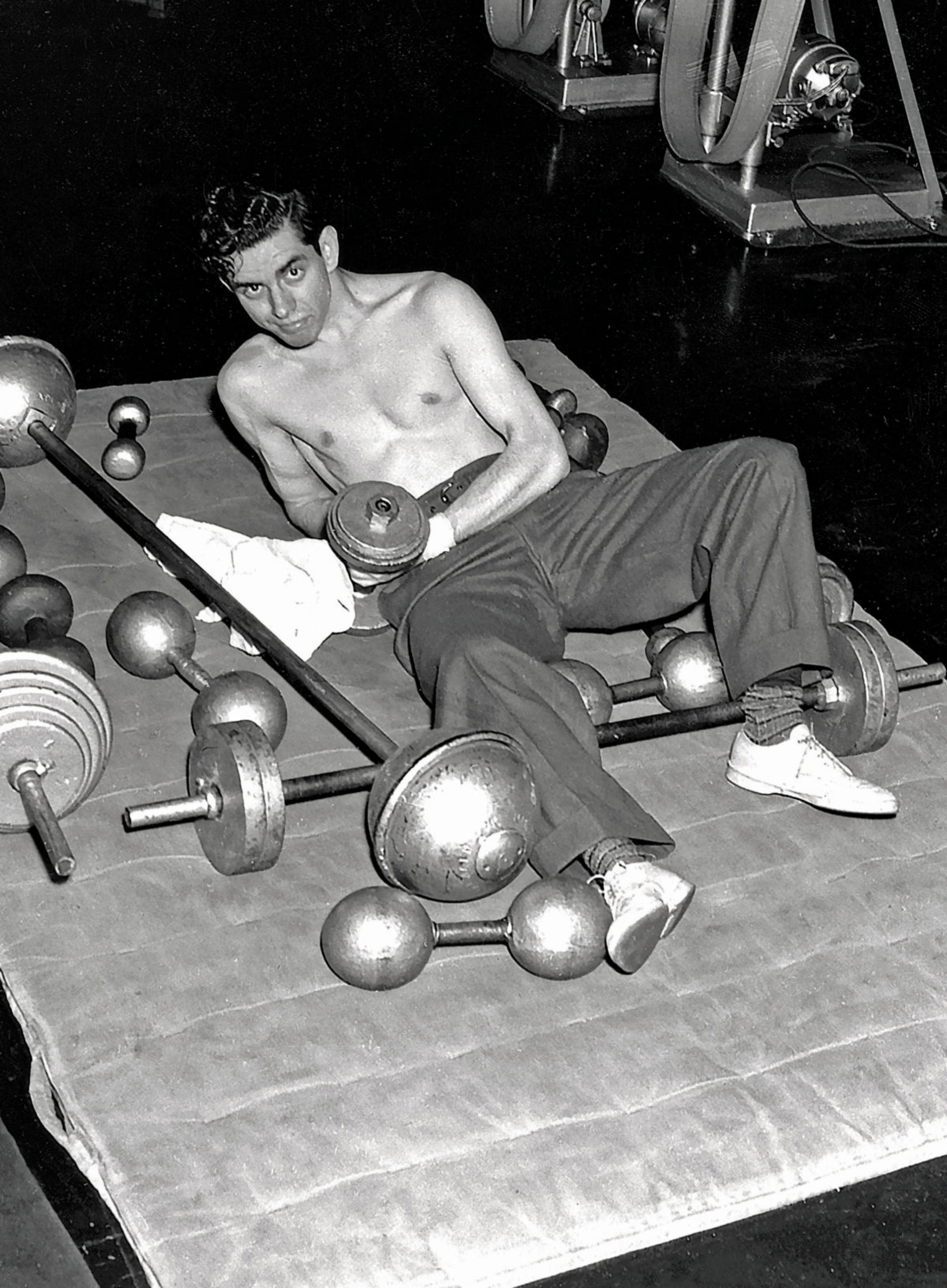
The story of Superman begins not on the planet Krypton but in the city of Cleveland, Ohio, with writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster. The two boys, both Jewish and born in 1914, met around 1931 in high school. Siegel was a Cleveland native, but Shuster had moved there with his family from Toronto. The pair bonded through their mutual love of science fiction, movies and newspaper comic strips, all of which helped them escape the harsh realities around them—the Great Depression was in its early days, and both the Siegel and Shuster families were poor.

The boys first collaborated on short, usually humorous illustrated stories for their high school newspaper. But harsh reality reached out again on the night of June 2, 1932, when Siegel's father, Michael, was robbed in his secondhand clothing store and died. Some accounts indicated he had been shot during the robbery, but according to the official reports filed by the coroner and the police, he died of a heart attack, with no gunshot wounds found on his body. No arrests were ever made in connection to the robbery. Best-selling author and occasional comic book writer Brad Meltzer, who researched the case for his 2008 novel, *The Book of Lies*, said the tragedy likely played a major role in the development of Siegel's signature character. "In 50 years of interviews, Jerry Siegel never once mentioned that his father died in a robbery," Meltzer told *USA Today*. "But think about it—your father dies in a robbery, and you invent a bulletproof man who becomes the world's greatest hero." That hero was conceived, Meltzer said, "because a boy lost his father. Superman came not out of our strength but out of our vulnerability."

Interestingly, the initial version of Superman was a villain. He appeared in "The Reign of the Superman," a short story written by Siegel for the third issue of *Science Fiction*, a mimeographed magazine that he created with Shuster, for which he served as editor and Shuster was art director. "The Reign of the Superman" was published in January 1933 and introduced Bill Dunn, a homeless man subjected to a scientific experiment that leaves him with mental powers enabling him to control other people's minds and causing him to set out to take over the world.

Soon after, inspired by popular pulp magazine and newspaper strip characters including Popeye, Zorro, the Shadow, Doc Savage and Buck Rogers, Siegel and Shuster rethought the character. Now he was a force for good—but while big and strong, he had no superpowers or distinctive, colorful

THE WRITE STUFF
Writer Jerry Siegel, pictured here in 1943, grew up loving science fiction, movies and newspaper comic strips.



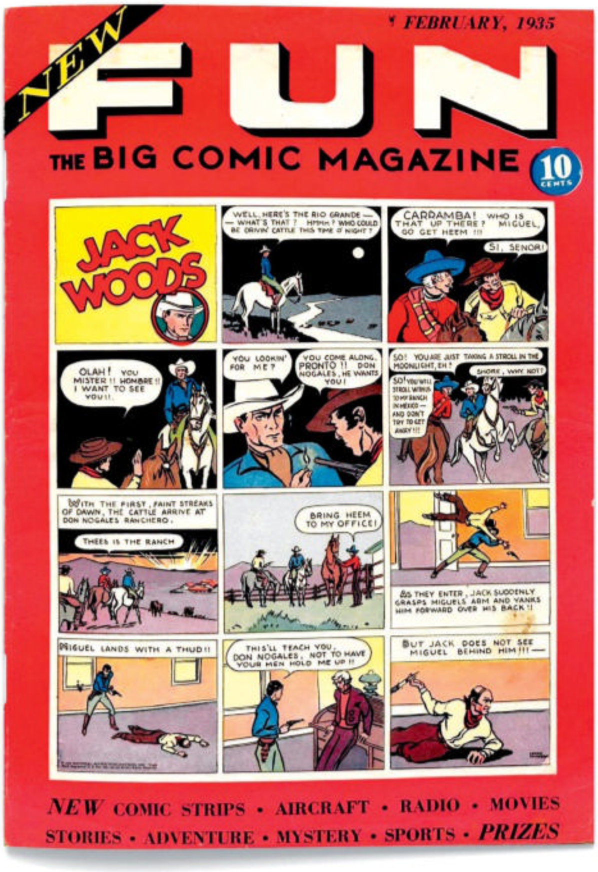
costume. By this time, Siegel and Shuster were passionate about creating and producing a newspaper comic strip of their own. Billing their concept as “the most astounding fiction character of all time,” Siegel and Shuster pitched “the Superman”—along with several other ideas—to various newspaper syndicates but found no takers.

Meanwhile, a new format was taking hold as a way of reprinting newspaper comic strips: the comic magazine (later to be commonly called the comic book). The next logical step for the format was to have it feature all-new material. That move came in 1935, when National Allied Publishing (later to be known as DC Comics), headed by Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, launched *New Fun*, the first regularly published comic magazine to run original content, albeit in black and white. Wheeler-Nicholson accepted several concepts from Siegel and Shuster, including “Henri Duval of France, Famed Soldier of Fortune” and “Doctor Occult, the Ghost Detective.”

By that point, the duo had a firmer handle on their Superman concept—now he came from an advanced world where the inhabitants had evolved to physical and intellectual near-perfection but could not stop their planet’s destruction. Superman wore a skintight costume (which Shuster had apparently based on the outfits worn by circus performers). He had superhuman strength and speed and the ability to leap great heights and distances. And in the tradition of the Shadow and Zorro, he had a secret identity—but unlike those characters, whose alter egos were wealthy aristocrats and feigned indifference to society’s problems, Superman’s other identity was reporter Clark Kent, an unremarkable everyman.

Kent was, in essence, a distillation of Siegel and Shuster themselves—nerdy, working class and socially awkward, but also intelligent, kind and of strong moral character. “As a high school student,” Siegel once said, “I thought that some day I might become a reporter, and I had crushes on several attractive girls who either didn’t know I existed or didn’t care I existed. … It occurred to me: What if I … had something special going for me, like jumping over buildings or throwing cars around or something like that?” As comic book historian

“He came from an advanced world where the inhabitants had evolved to physical and intellectual near-perfection but could not stop their planet’s destruction.”


FEBRUARY, 1935
NEW
FUN
THE BIG COMIC MAGAZINE
10 CENTS
JACK WOODS
WELL, HERE'S THE RIO GRANDE — WHAT'S THAT? HMMM? WHO COULD BE DRIVIN' CATTLE THIS TIME O' NIGHT?
CARRAMBA! WHO IS THAT UP THERE? MIGUEL, GO GET HEEM!!!
SI, SENOR!
OLAH! YOU MISTER!! HOMBRE!! I WANT TO SEE YOU!!
YOU LOOKIN' FOR ME?
YOU COME ALONG, PRONTO!! DON NOGALES, HE WANTS YOU!
SO! YOU ARE JUST TAKING A STROLL IN THE MOONLIGHT, EH?
SHORE, WHY NOT?
SO! YOU WILL STROLL WITH US TO MY RANCH IN MEXICO — AND DON'T TRY TO GET ANGRY!!!
WITH THE FIRST, FAINT STREAKS OF DAWN, THE CATTLE ARRIVE AT DON NOGALES RANCHERO.
THEES IS THE RANCH
BRING HEEM TO MY OFFICE!
AS THEY ENTER, JACK SUDDENLY GRASPS MIGUEL'S ARM AND YANKS HIM FORWARD OVER HIS BACK!!
MIGUEL LANDS WITH A THUD!!
THIS'LL TEACH YOU, DON NOGALES, NOT TO HAVE YOUR MEN HOLD ME UP!!
BUT JACK DOES NOT SEE MIGUEL BEHIND HIM!!! —
NEW COMIC STRIPS • AIRCRAFT • RADIO • MOVIES
STORIES • ADVENTURE • MYSTERY • SPORTS • PRIZES

IRON MAN
Superman artist Joe Shuster (left), along with Siegel, made Clark Kent a nerdy distillation of themselves.

FUN AND GAMES
New Fun (above) became the first comic magazine to run original content, rather than newspaper reprints.

> “Think about it—your father dies in a robbery and you invent a bulletproof man who becomes the world’s greatest hero. ... Superman came not out of our strength, but out of our vulnerability.”
>
> —Brad Meltzer

FATHER FIGURES
Superman creators Jerry Siegel (left) and Joe Shuster (right) snap a photo with a Funnyman poster in 1948.

TRIX-CYCLE

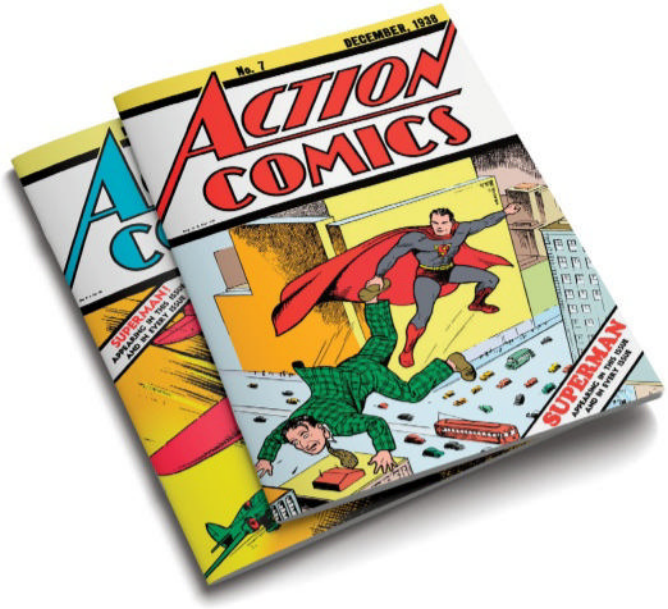
Les Daniels put it, Clark Kent was "mere human goodness concealing an even greater goodness." This new version of Superman was a hero with a strong social conscience, a protector of the innocent, a crusader against corruption and injustice, who did not hesitate to defend "the little guy."

Although Siegel and Shuster were producing work for Wheeler-Nicholson, his company was on shaky financial ground. As much as they wanted to get Superman published, they held off on making a deal with Wheeler-Nicholson for the character, even though he had expressed interest in October 1935. Instead, they collaborated with him on the creation of Slam Bradley, a two-fisted private detective and adventurer that debuted in *Detective Comics* No. 1 (cover dated March 1937). Siegel and Shuster shopped Superman around to other publishers but were rejected repeatedly. They did, however, gain the support of M. C. Gaines, an influential and well-connected industry executive. That served them well in December 1937, when Wheeler-Nicholson, forced into bankruptcy, was removed from National. The company was taken over by Wheeler-Nicholson's distributors, Harry Donenfeld and Jack Liebowitz, whose recent infusion of cash had kept National afloat.

Donenfeld and Liebowitz wanted to launch another anthology title featuring all-new material, called *Action Comics*, and Gaines suggested that they consider Siegel and Shuster's Superman.

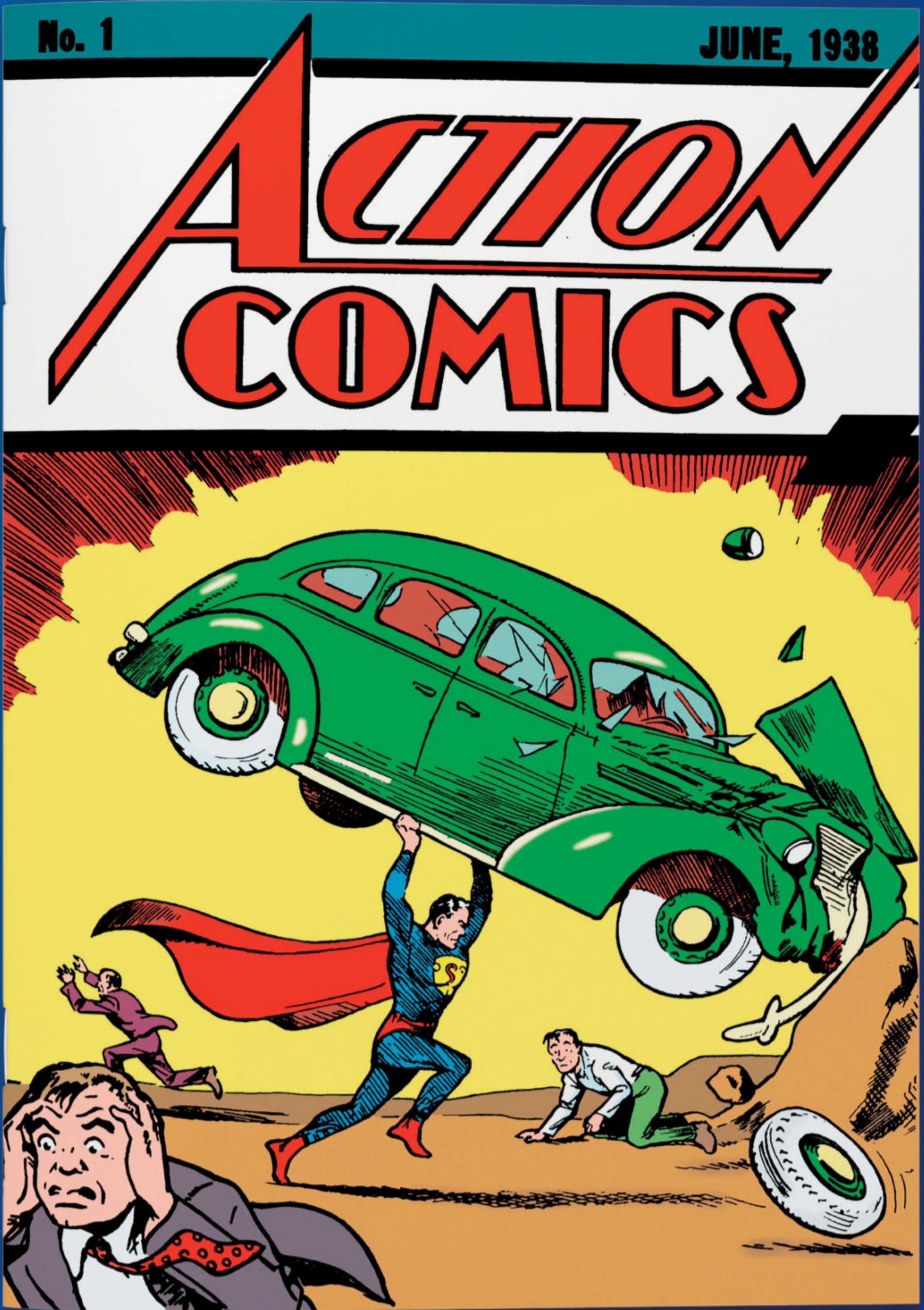
By February 1938, Siegel and Shuster made a deal with National for Superman and were working with editor Vincent Sullivan to introduce the character in *Action Comics*. As their first Superman story had been produced as a newspaper strip, Sullivan had them cut up and paste the artwork into comic book format. The result was a 13-page story that National bought for $130. Through that purchase, Siegel and Shuster could move forward with the character they had been trying to sell for five years, and National gained legal ownership of a property in which its top executives reportedly had little faith—Donenfeld felt the concept was silly, and Liebowitz described the decision to publish it as "a pure accident."

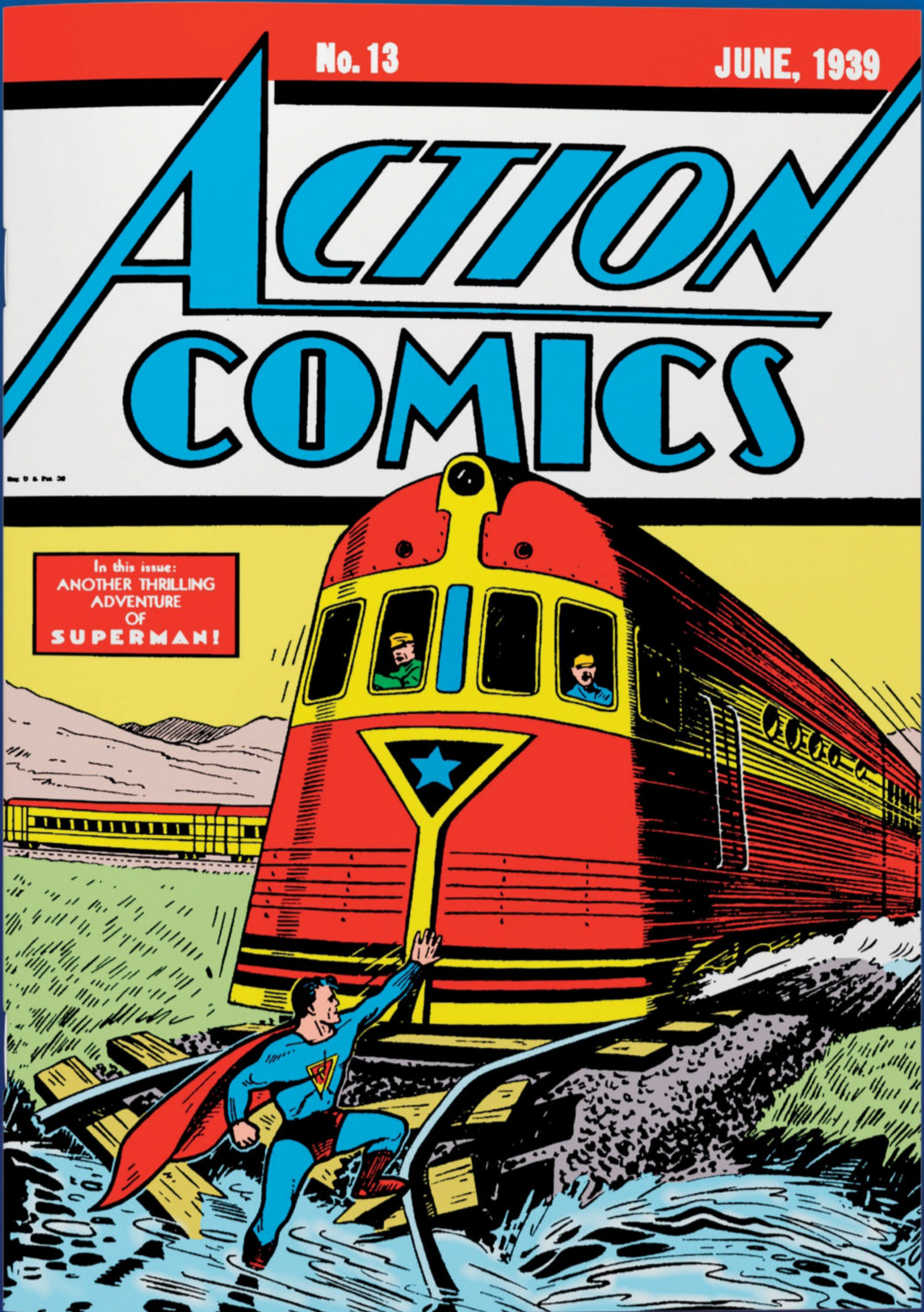
Superman's debut in *Action Comics* No. 1, cover dated June 1938, began with a brief depiction of his origin, after which Superman invaded the home of a state governor to convince him to stop the execution of a woman wrongfully imprisoned for murder. Then he roughed up a man who was beating his wife, saved Clark Kent's colleague—Lois Lane—from a kidnapping, and confronted a crooked U.S. senator and the lobbyist paying him off. The story continued in the next issue, with Superman going after the wealthy munitions manufacturer behind the lobbyist, rescuing Lois from a firing squad in South America and stopping a war there. In *Action Comics* No. 3, he took up the cause of mine workers after discovering the unsafe conditions into which the men's callous boss was knowingly sending them. Superman trapped the boss in his own deadly mine to get him to see the error of his ways.


No. 7
DECEMBER, 1938
ACTION COMICS
SUPERMAN APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE AND IN EVERY ISSUE
SUPERMAN! APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE AND IN EVERY ISSUE

TAKE COVER
Superman's presence on the *Action Comics* covers was intermittent at first, but soon he earned a permanent spot.

MAKING A SPLASH
Action Comics distributor Harry Donenfeld called the cover of Superman's debut issue (right) "ridiculous."


No. 1
JUNE, 1938
ACTION COMICS


No. 13
JUNE, 1939
ACTION COMICS
In this issue:
ANOTHER THRILLING
ADVENTURE
OF
SUPERMAN!

CHOOSE YOUR PRIZE!
Get it the American Way
GET YOUR PRIZE THIS EASY AMERICAN WAY
SUPERMAN
TEN CENTS

ON THE RIGHT TRACK
By issue 13 of *Action Comics* (left), Superman had taken over the cover again, despite an early ban.

CHILD'S PLAY
A young reader (above) takes in a Superman comic in October 1942. The hero debuted four years prior.

It soon became clear that Superman was a hit—and the main selling point of *Action Comics*. The first issue's striking cover, illustrated by Shuster, showed Superman lifting a car and smashing it into a boulder as men scattered. Donenfeld thought it was "ridiculous" and apparently issued an edict that Superman should appear on the covers only rarely. Despite being the title's lead feature, Superman was not on the cover again until issue 7, and was sidelined again until issue 10. By that point, however, a survey conducted by National had shown that Superman was the most popular feature in the magazine, and the company had determined that the sales rose significantly whenever he was on the cover. After issue 11, Superman would appear in some capacity on every cover of *Action Comics*.

> **"We really felt that we had something that was very different."**
> **—Jerry Siegel**

"We really felt that we had something that was very different," Siegel said later. "Something that the public really would take to its heart." Indeed, Siegel and Shuster had introduced the first comic book superhero, and thus created an entirely new genre, one that spawned a wave of colorfully costumed crimefighters published by National and its competitors—a wave that would include Batman, the Flash, Captain Marvel, Green Lantern, Captain America and Wonder Woman.

Comic books—and pop culture—were changed forever.

CHAPTER 1

DAWN OF THE SUPERHERO

UP, UP AND AWAY

After taking the comic book world by storm, Superman gained prominence across popular culture—but lost his creators

In developing Superman, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were inspired not only by pulp and newspaper strip heroes, but also by figures from mythology—“Samson, Hercules and all the strong men I heard tell of,” Siegel once explained. By combining bits and pieces of all these characters, they formed an amalgamation that was both familiar and refreshingly original.

Observers also attributed religious subtext to the concept, noting that, like Moses, Superman was placed in a small ark as a baby and sent away from certain doom to grow up and become a great hero. And like Jesus, he was sent to Earth by his otherworldly father and lives among the people as one of them—but is something far greater. Furthermore, Superman could be considered the ultimate immigrant story: an alien who comes to America with nothing to his name and ultimately becomes the country’s greatest champion.

According to Siegel and Shuster, that kind of subtext was unintentional. “It just happened that way,” Siegel said. “We just thought it was a good idea,” Shuster explained. Regardless, Superman struck a chord with readers because of all those elements, along with one more: “A lot of it had to do with wish fulfillment—everybody wishes they could have abilities like Superman’s,” Mike Carlin, editor of the Superman comic book line from 1987 to 1995, explains. “I think people liked the idea of a quick solution to a problem they couldn’t handle in real life.” Carlin adds that he believes Superman’s greatest ability is “his commitment to doing the right thing.” That element was especially crucial, given the current events of the time—Superman served as a symbol of altruism and justice during a particularly dark period, with an ongoing economic crisis and another war brewing in Europe.

Superman became such a hit in such a short time that he was launched in a daily black-and-white newspaper strip on Jan. 16, 1939, mere months after his debut, with a Sunday color strip beginning on Nov. 5—it took the comic book to put Superman where Siegel and Shuster had wanted him to be in the first place. The newspaper strip was a huge success, appearing in hundreds of newspapers nationwide with an estimated readership of more than 20 million. Also in 1939, National started a new comic book title, simply called *Superman*—the first comic series devoted to a single character.

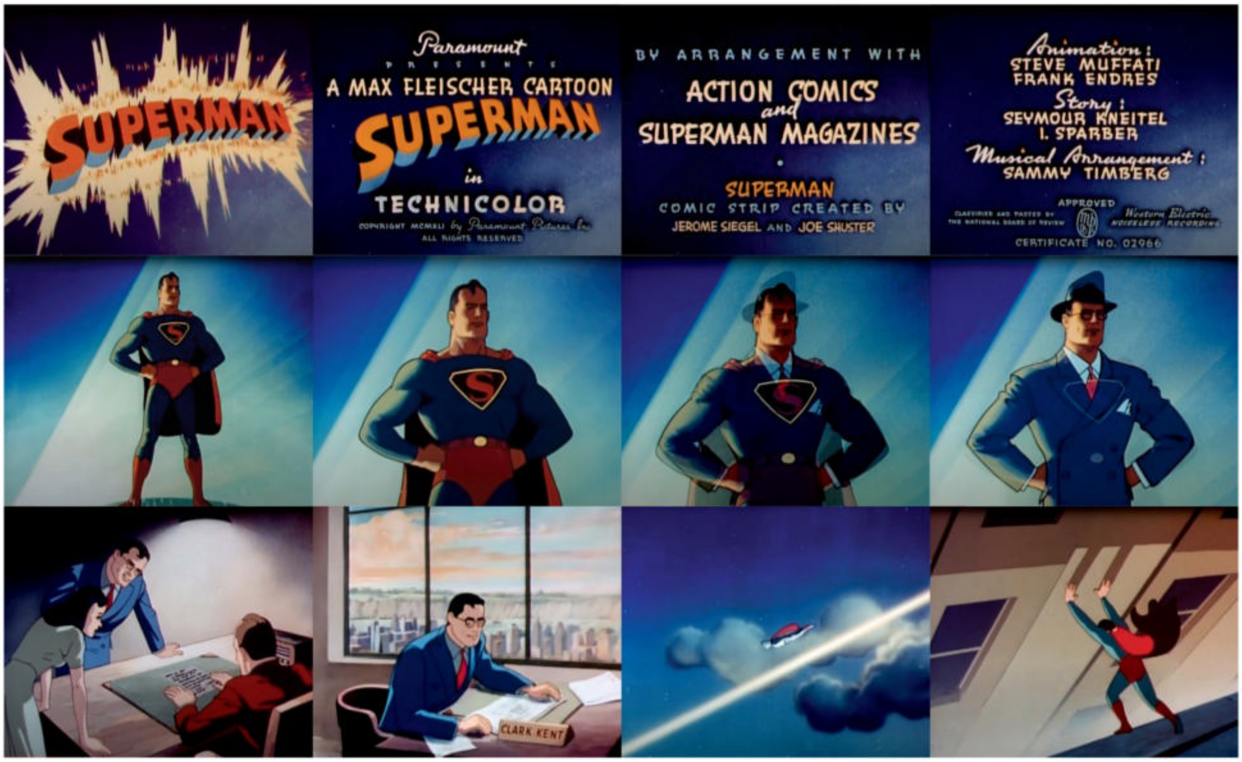
Siegel and Shuster were responsible for all of the material produced for the comics and the newspaper strip. More and more Superman content was needed: The character started to appear in

A LASTING LEGACY
Joe Shuster poses with some publications featuring the superhero he co-created.

$2.00
AMAZING WORLD OF
SUPERMAN
NT POSTER "MAP of KRYPTON"
SUPERMAN

additional titles, including *New York World's Fair Comics*, published in 1939 and 1940, and, beginning in 1941, the regular ongoing series *World's Best Comics* (changed to *World's Finest Comics* with issue 2). Siegel and Shuster found themselves doing very well financially—and with more work than they could handle on their own. They were able to negotiate increases in their page rates, create a studio and hire assistants to help Shuster produce the artwork. The two men were also due a percentage of the profits from all subsidiary rights that were licensed with regard to Superman, so it was presumably music to their ears when the character was given a radio show, which started on Feb. 12, 1940, and a series of animated shorts that premiered in September 1941.

The radio show, titled *The Adventures of Superman*, starred Bud Collyer, who used two distinct voices to differentiate between Superman and Clark Kent. It was a ratings smash and added several key elements to the canon. While the comics had included Lois Lane from the start, and soon after introduced supervillains like the bald-headed mad scientist Ultra-Humanite and the red-headed master criminal Luthor (later given the first name Lex and turned bald as well), the radio show introduced Perry White, editor of the *Daily Planet*, and Jimmy Olsen, the newspaper's copy boy. It established Superman's ability to fly and his friendship with Batman, and was the first place to feature kryptonite—radioactive debris from Superman's home planet, Krypton, that could incapacitate him. Storylines involving kryptonite were often used when Collyer was on vacation, thus sidelining Superman temporarily and shifting the focus to other characters. Interestingly, kryptonite debuted on the radio show in 1943, but in 1940, Siegel and Shuster had produced a story for the comics that featured the same basic concept, only it was called "K-metal." This story was never published, however, most likely because by the end of it, Superman had revealed his secret identity to Lois, and National Comics felt this development would alter the status quo too drastically.


SUPERMAN
Paramount
PRESENTS
A MAX FLEISCHER CARTOON
SUPERMAN
in
TECHNICOLOR
COPYRIGHT MCMXLI by Paramount Pictures Inc
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
BY ARRANGEMENT WITH
ACTION COMICS
and
SUPERMAN MAGAZINES
SUPERMAN
COMIC STRIP CREATED BY
JEROME SIEGEL AND JOE SHUSTER
Animation:
STEVE MUFFATI
FRANK ENDRES
Story:
SEYMOUR KNEITEL
I. SPARBER
Musical Arrangement:
SAMMY TIMBERG
APPROVED
CLASSIFIED AND PASSED BY THE NATIONAL BOARD OF REVIEW
Western Electric
NOISELESS RECORDING
CERTIFICATE NO. 02966
CLARK KENT

The animated shorts, 17 in all, were produced from 1941 to 1943, first by Fleischer Studios, which handled the initial nine (including the pilot), and then by Paramount, which took over after Fleischer ran into financial difficulties. Each short was filled with action, a rich color palette and a moody style that evoked both art deco and film noir. To this day the shorts are considered a high point in the history of both animation and Superman.

Superman also extended his reach to prose fiction with the 1942 novel *The Adventures of Superman*, by George Lowther. It marked the first time that a comic book character was adapted into novel form and was the first Superman story credited to a writer other than Jerry Siegel. The story included an expanded version of Superman's origin, with the first extensive exploration of Krypton and the names of his biological parents finalized as Jor-El and Lara (previously Jor-L and Lora). It also revealed more about his childhood on Earth, during which he was raised by Eben and Sarah Kent (who, in the comics, would later be named Jonathan and Martha).

> **"To this day the shorts are considered a high point in the history of both animation and Superman."**

RADIO WAVES
Bud Collyer (opposite), pictured in 1949, starred in the *Adventures of Superman* radio show.

IN MOTION
A total of 17 animated shorts (above) were produced in the early 1940s, continuing Superman's media empire.

> “Superman served as a symbol of altruism and justice during a particularly dark period, with an ongoing economic crisis and another war brewing in Europe.”

PIECE OF CAKE
Joe Shuster (left) and Jerry Siegel slice a cake for Superman’s birthday celebration in 1976.

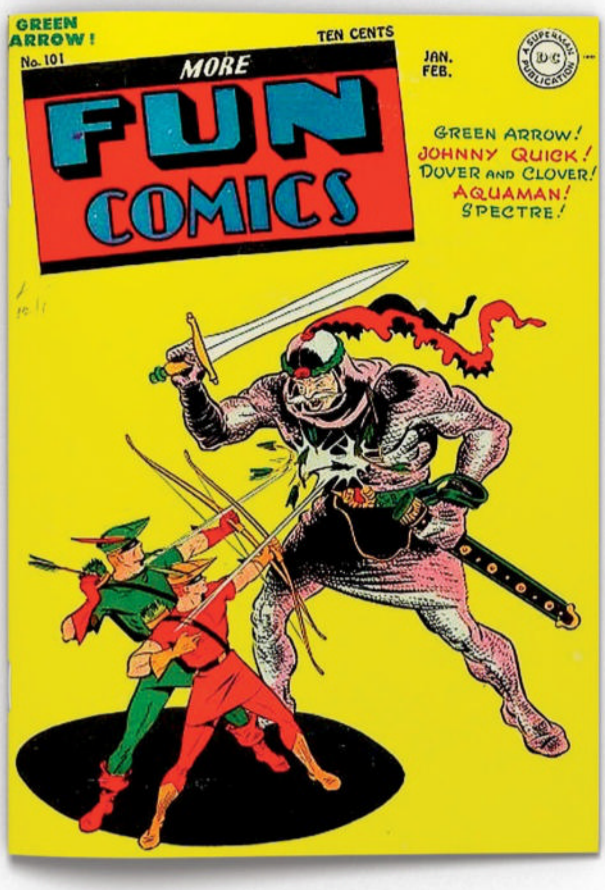
GUEST

> “Superman had become a merchandising powerhouse generating millions of dollars.”

At the same time, Superman had become a merchandising powerhouse generating millions of dollars. His name and likeness appeared on a myriad of products including action figures, puzzles, “Krypto rayguns” that projected film-strip images onto walls, coloring books, shirts, trading cards and countless other items.

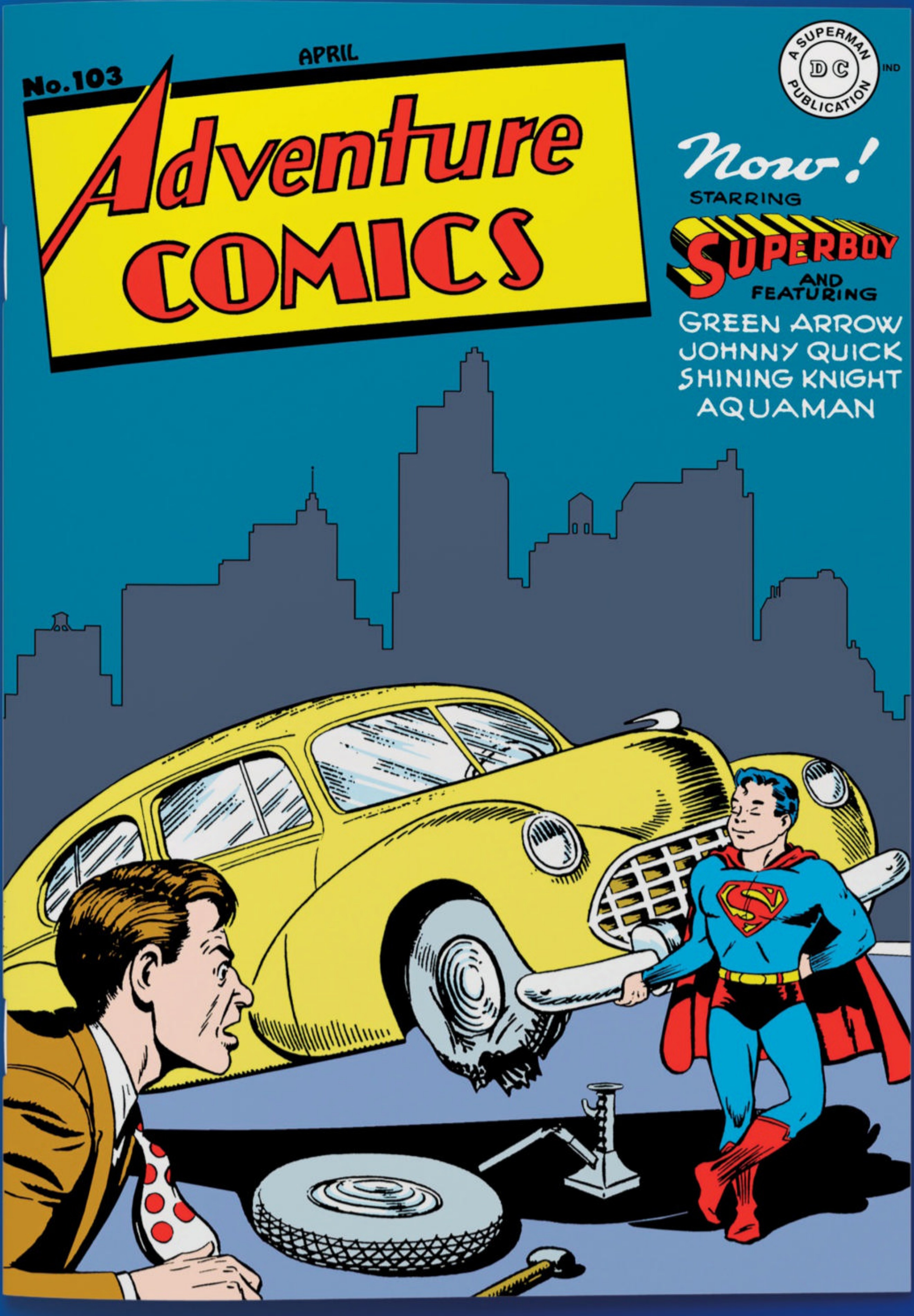
Jerry Siegel had hoped to expand the franchise with “Superboy,” a series of stories about Superman when he was a child. It would emphasize humor, with Superboy portrayed as a mischievous kid. “It will be about Superman before he developed a social conscience,” Siegel explained once. His first pitch, submitted to National six months after Superman’s debut, was rejected. Siegel pitched the concept again in December 1940, this time with a full script, but National rejected that, as well. But in late 1944, while Siegel was away serving in the U.S. Army during World War II, National introduced Superboy in *More Fun Comics* No. 101 (cover dated January-February 1945), with a script by Don Cameron based in part on the one Siegel had submitted. The story was drawn by Shuster, who wrote to Siegel to let him know what was happening. Siegel was reportedly outraged, and his already-strained relationship with National worsened.

Siegel had been feeling for some time that he and Shuster were not getting their fair share of the profits from Superman. National was making millions, but the character’s creators were seeing only a fraction of that money. In the early 1940s, Siegel and Shuster were estimated to be making at least $30,000 apiece annually, which, adjusted for inflation, would be about $550,000 today. Further, they came to believe they were not receiving their full share of the profits they were due from Superman licensing. In April 1947, as their 10-year contract with National was nearing its end, Siegel and Shuster sued the company for $5 million, with the ultimate intention of regaining ownership of Superman and stopping the publication of Superboy. National argued that since it owned Superman, and Superboy was derivative of Superman, the company owned Superboy too.


GREEN ARROW!
No. 101
TEN CENTS
MORE
FUN COMICS
JAN. FEB.
A SUPERMAN DC PUBLICATION
GREEN ARROW!
JOHNNY QUICK!
DOVER AND CLOVER!
AQUAMAN!
SPECTRE!

BOY MEETS WORLD
Siegel originally intended Superboy to be a mischievous kid. His initial script was heavily revised.

ONE AND THE SAME
National argued that since it owned Superman, and Superboy was derivative of Superman, it owned both.


No.103
APRIL
Adventure COMICS
A SUPERMAN DC PUBLICATION
IND
Now!
STARRING
SUPERBOY
AND FEATURING
GREEN ARROW
JOHNNY QUICK
SHINING KNIGHT
AQUAMAN

SUPERMAN

> “While they had created a champion for all the people, there was no champion for them—no Superman to come to their rescue.”

The judge in the case, J. Addison Young, concluded that Siegel and Shuster “had no property rights in Superman since they had assigned all rights to the publisher at the start of Superman’s and their own career.” He also ruled that Siegel was the sole owner of Superboy, and that National had no right to publish the character. Further, the judge acknowledged there were irregularities in the percentages that Siegel and Shuster were receiving from subsidiary rights related to Superman. Eventually the two sides reached a settlement in which Siegel and Shuster were paid $94,000 and agreed that National owned all rights to Superman and Superboy. But in the aftermath, both men were fired from National, and their creator credit was removed from all Superman material. They had spent a fortune in legal fees and were now unable to find much work elsewhere in the comic industry. On top of that, Shuster’s eyesight was failing, and he was having difficulty drawing.

Despite the absence of his creators, Superman continued to flourish. In contrast, both Siegel and Shuster soon fell on hard times. While they had created a champion for all the people, there was no champion for them—no Superman to come to their rescue.

NOT SO SUPER
Siegel and Shuster were paid $94,000 in a 1947 legal settlement but signed all rights over to National.

CHAPTER 1

DAWN OF THE SUPERHERO

HITTING NEW HEIGHTS

Even without his creators, Superman thrived as a comic book property—and made the leap to live-action stardom

Before they were removed from Superman, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster built a strong foundation for the character and put him on a path of growth and evolution. In addition to Lex Luthor, they had introduced other memorable antagonists including the Prankster, whose criminal acts involved practical jokes; the Toyman, who used toys to commit his crimes; and Mr. Mxyztplk (later spelled Mxyzptlk), an impish, inter-dimensional being who used his magical powers in attempts to drive Superman crazy. Siegel and Shuster also expanded Superman's powers and abilities, giving him telescopic, microscopic and x-ray vision and enabling him to fly faster than the speed of light so that he could travel through time. "As the strip went on, we made him more and more powerful," Siegel said.

As he grew in power, Superman moved further away from his original role as a champion for the oppressed and for social justice—he had bigger, more immediate threats to deal with, around the world and beyond. That was the case in the comic books, at least, where his adventures started to drift more often toward science fiction. On the radio show, he remained somewhat more "grounded" and closer to his roots, taking on racketeers, crooked government officials, Nazi agents and domestic hate groups. In one 1946 radio storyline, Superman passionately told a group of boys who had been working for a white supremacist organization, "Remember this as long as you live .... Anyone who tries to tell you that a man can't be a good American because he's a Catholic or a Jew, a Protestant or whatever—you can be pretty sure he's a rotten American himself. Not only a rotten American, but a rotten human being!" Later that year, in a particularly memorable storyline, Superman confronted the Ku Klux Klan. This story, "Clan of the Fiery Cross," was pitched to the show by author and human rights activist Stetson Kennedy, who had managed to infiltrate the KKK and gather information about the group to expose them, their organizational structure, their code words and their secret rituals. Not only was the storyline a ratings smash, it also reportedly caused recruitment and membership numbers in the KKK to plummet. (In 2019, this story was adapted into comic book form as *Superman Smashes the Klan* and later won Eisner awards—the comic book industry's version of the Academy Awards—for Best Publication for Kids and Best Adaptation from Another Medium.)

Superman also remained more down-to-earth, figuratively speaking, when he was brought to the big screen for the first time, in 1948's 15-part,

KIRK AS KAL-EL
Kirk Alyn poses on the set of the live-action *Superman* serial, circa 1948. It was the character's big-screen debut.

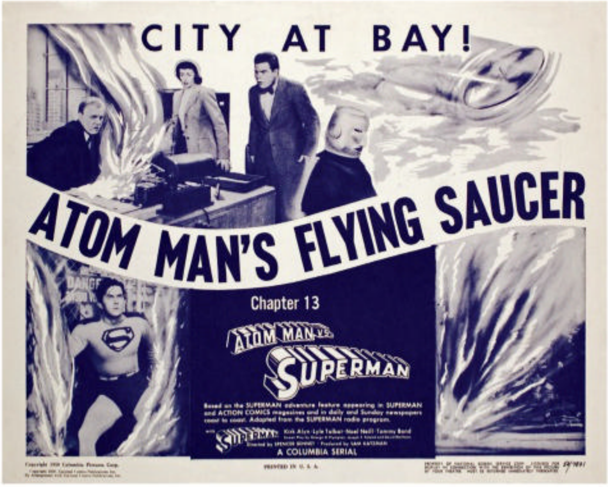
> **“As he grew in power, Superman moved further away from his original role as a champion for the oppressed.”**

live-action serial, *Superman*, starring Kirk Alyn in the title role, Noel Neill as Lois Lane, Tommy Bond (formerly Butch in the *Our Gang* shorts) as Jimmy Olsen and Pierre Watkin as Perry White. The storyline depicted Superman’s origin, an early encounter with kryptonite and his efforts to stop a female criminal mastermind called the Spider Lady, played by Carol Forman. Despite a low budget, a rushed production schedule, limited special effects and paper-thin characterizations, the action-packed serial generated $1 million in grosses, making it one of the most successful serials ever produced.

A follow-up, *Atom Man vs. Superman*, arrived in 1950. Another 15-parter, it featured the same main cast and marked the first live-action appearance of Lex Luthor, portrayed by Lyle Talbot. The storyline involved Luthor adopting a masked identity, Atom Man, and developing a teleportation ray (similar to the transporter from *Star Trek*) and synthetic kryptonite to use against Superman. *Atom Man vs. Superman* was not quite the box-office success that its predecessor had been, and serials were already on the way out as a format, so a third Superman serial never happened. The character’s next foray in live action would be for the burgeoning realm of television.

On both the radio show and the serials, National Comics exerted considerable creative control, with the company’s editorial director, Whitney Ellsworth, providing extensive input. Ellsworth had a long and intimate connection to Superman—he

SILVER SCREEN
Kirk Alyn (standing) starred as the title character in the 15-part *Superman* serial and its follow-up.


CITY AT BAY!
ATOM MAN'S FLYING SAUCER
Chapter 13
ATOM MAN VS. SUPERMAN
Based on the SUPERMAN adventure feature appearing in SUPERMAN and ACTION COMICS magazines and in daily and Sunday newspapers coast to coast. Adapted from the SUPERMAN radio program.
A COLUMBIA SERIAL
PRINTED IN U.S.A.

UP AND ATOM
Atom Man vs. Superman (1950) marked Lex Luthor's first live-action appearance.

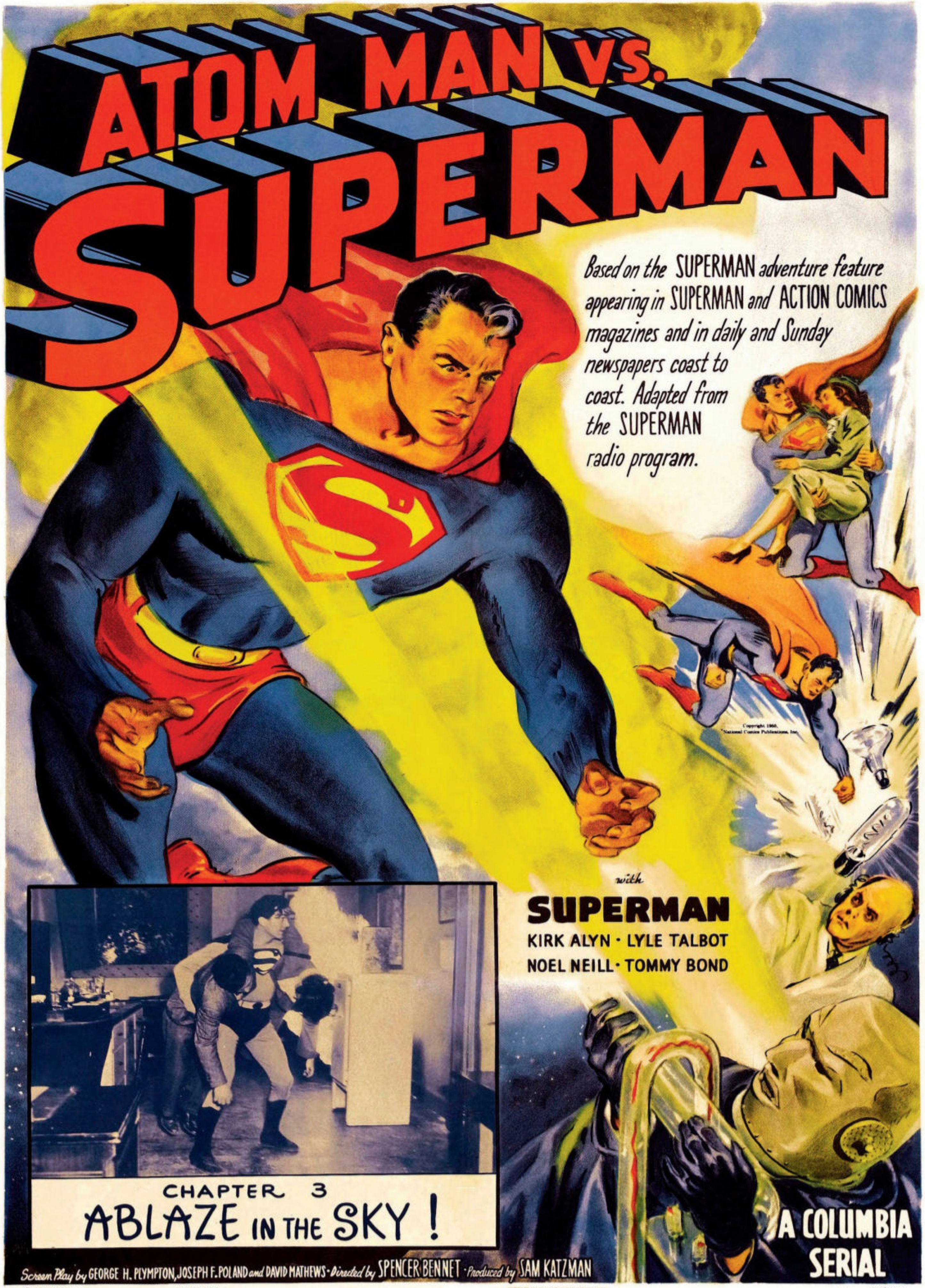
IDENTITY CRISIS
In the serial (right), ultimately Superman's last, Lex Luthor adopts the masked identity of Atom Man.

> **"*Superman and the Mole Men* demonstrated that it was feasible to produce an ongoing TV series about the superhero, mostly by using him sparingly."**

had been involved editorially with the comic books almost from the beginning, supervising Siegel and Shuster, and was a key contributing writer to the newspaper strip. When National decided to move the Man of Steel to TV, Ellsworth had the task of developing the series with Robert Maxwell, who had been overseeing Superman licensing for National since 1939 and had developed and produced the radio show. They began with a pilot episode that ended up being released theatrically in 1951. Titled *Superman and the Mole Men*, it starred George Reeves as Superman/Clark Kent and Phyllis Coates as Lois Lane. The story captured the original essence of Superman, with the hero coming to the defense of subterranean creatures who emerge in a small town after a nearby oil-drilling operation intrudes upon their natural habitat. The townspeople, terrified of the mysterious, odd-looking creatures, are relentless in their efforts to kill them, and face an increasingly disgusted Superman. "I'm going to give you one last chance to stop acting like Nazi storm troopers," the Man of Steel tells the angry mob before subduing them and escorting the creatures to safety.

Another low-budget, quickly produced effort with rudimentary visual effects, *Superman and the Mole Men* nonetheless demonstrated that it was feasible to produce an ongoing TV series about the popular superhero, mostly by using him sparingly—Clark Kent had far more screen time and involvement in the plot than Superman did—and not putting him in situations that required comic book-style spectacle. Running just under 60 minutes, the film was later repurposed as two episodes of the TV series *Adventures of Superman*, which premiered in 1952 with Reeves and Coates reprising their roles, joined by Jack Larson and John Hamilton as Jimmy Olsen and Perry White, respectively. (Coates became unavailable after the first season and was replaced by a returning Noel Neill.)

Over six seasons and 104 episodes, *Adventures of Superman* attracted a huge audience and captivated children. The series started out in black and white with a relatively mature tone and a moody, noirish feel—Superman often faced gangsters and crime lords, a number of whom ended up dead—but by the third season, it was being produced in color and had taken on a much more lighthearted, kid-friendly approach, with more science-fiction elements. Robert Maxwell, who had played a key creative role in the first season, left the series before the shift in tone was implemented, leading some observers to believe that he disagreed with the changes. Whitney Ellsworth remained and became the show's



ATOM MAN VS. SUPERMAN

Based on the SUPERMAN *adventure feature appearing in* SUPERMAN *and* ACTION COMICS *magazines and in daily and Sunday newspapers coast to coast. Adapted from the* SUPERMAN *radio program.*

Copyright 1950.
National Comics Publications, Inc.

with

SUPERMAN

KIRK ALYN · LYLE TALBOT
NOEL NEILL · TOMMY BOND

CHAPTER 3
ABLAZE IN THE SKY !

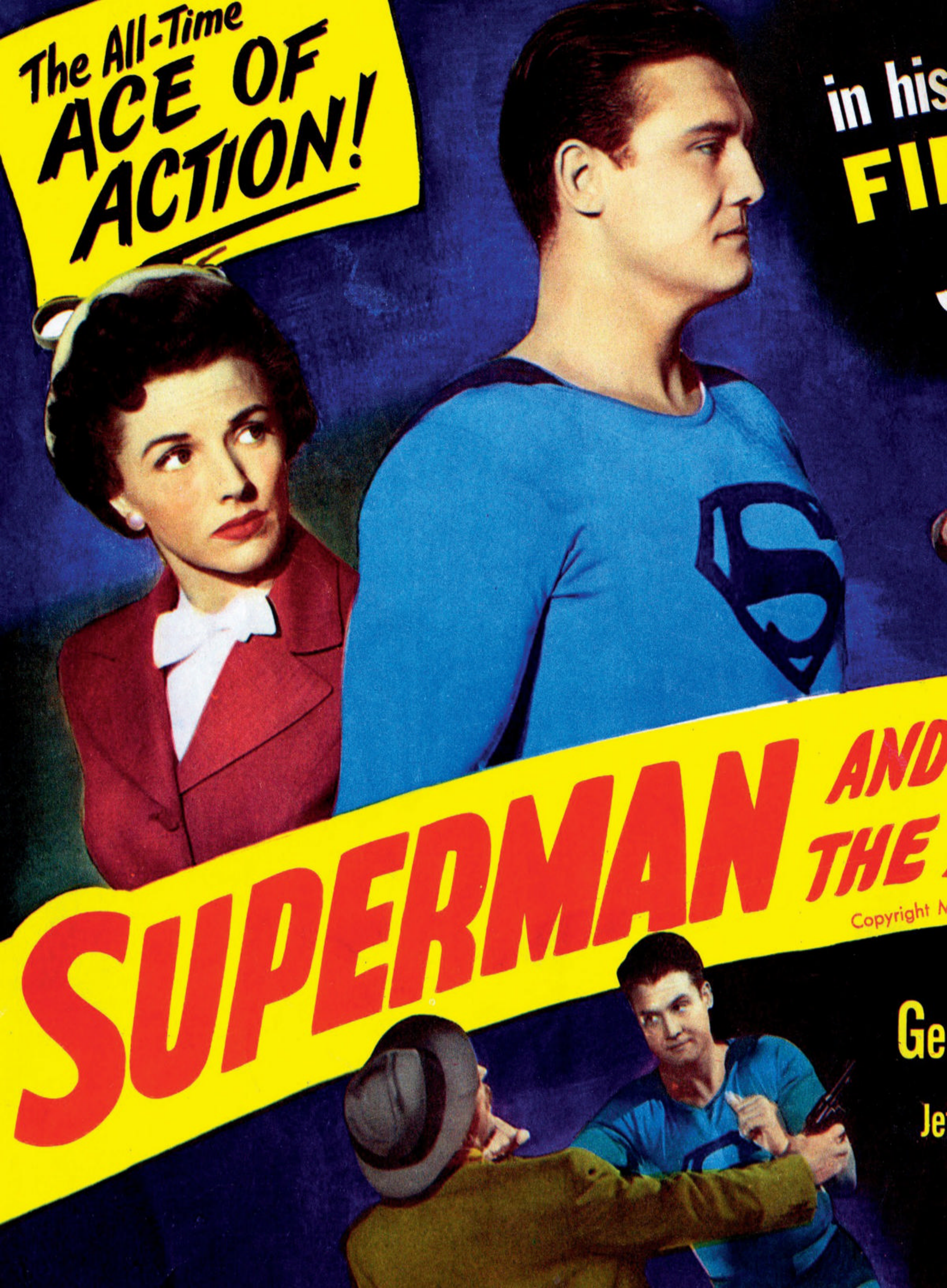
A COLUMBIA SERIAL

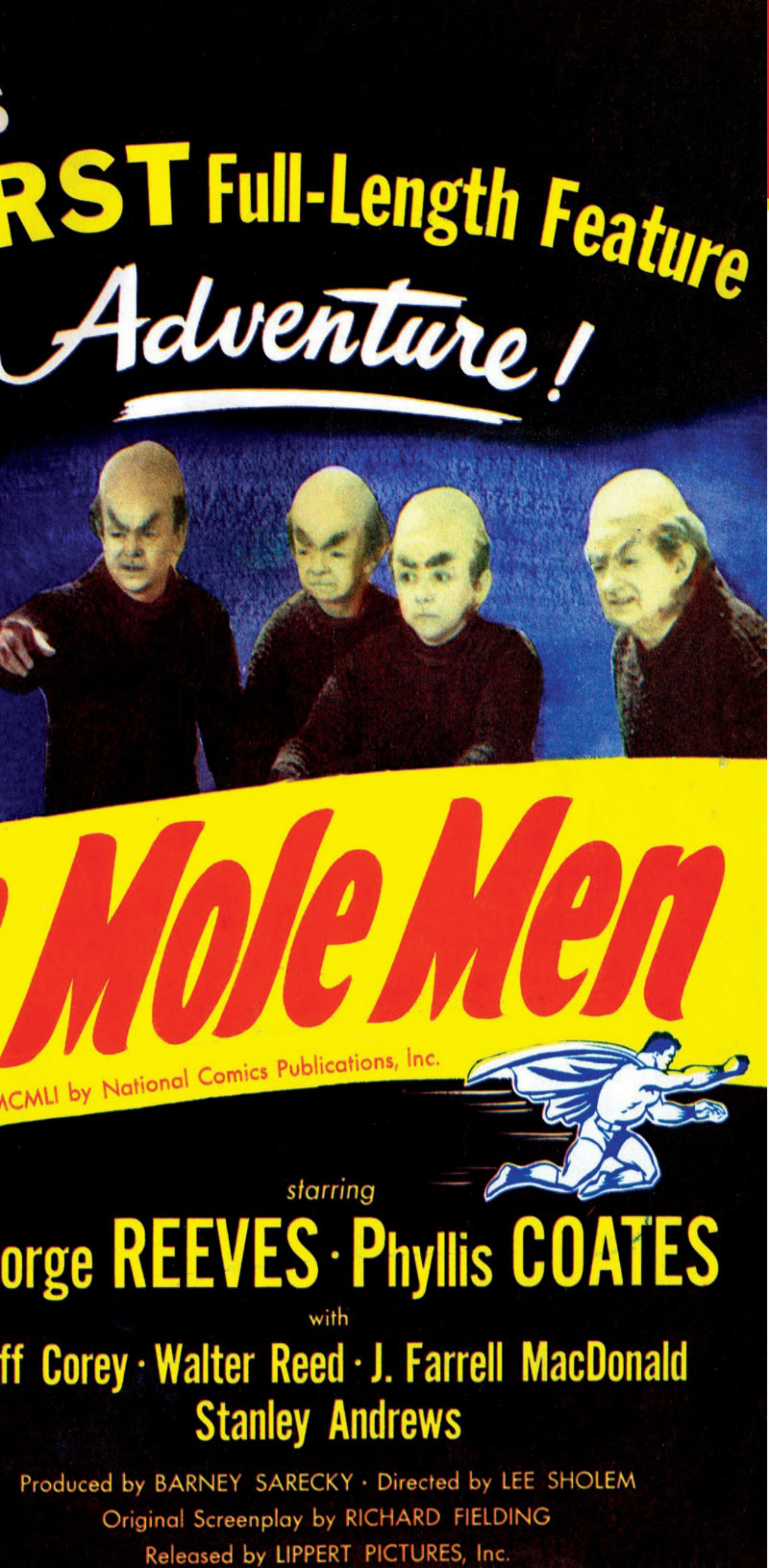
Screen Play by GEORGE H. PLYMPTON, JOSEPH F. POLAND *and* DAVID MATHEWS · *Directed by* SPENCER BENNET · *Produced by* SAM KATZMAN

Copyright 1950 Columbia Pictures Corp.

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

39990 50/7803


The All-Time
ACE OF
ACTION!
in his
FI
J
SUPERMAN
AND
THE
Copyright M
Ge
Je


RST Full-Length Feature
Adventure!
Mole Men
MCMLI by National Comics Publications, Inc.
starring
orge REEVES · Phyllis COATES
with
ff Corey · Walter Reed · J. Farrell MacDonald
Stanley Andrews
Produced by BARNEY SARECKY · Directed by LEE SHOLEM
Original Screenplay by RICHARD FIELDING
Released by LIPPERT PICTURES, Inc.

HOLY MOLEY
Superman and the Mole Men marked a return to form for the hero as he comes to the defense of the helpless.

GEORGE'S JOURNEY George Reeves played Superman/Clark Kent in *Adventures of Superman* (above) until his 1959 death.

LUCY IN THE SKY George Reeves flexes as Superman for Lucille Ball (right) during an episode of *I Love Lucy* in 1957.

supervising producer. In that position, he developed story ideas for the episodes with the editor of the Superman comic book titles, Mort Weisinger, who also served as the TV show's story editor. "Together we knew as much about Superman as it was possible to know," Ellsworth said.

Weisinger ultimately oversaw Superman's comic book adventures for 20 years and proved to be one of the most consequential editors in the character's history. "In advance of production [of each season of the TV series], we'd lock ourselves in a room and work on stories," Ellsworth explained. "We were able to give the writers outlines of what we wanted—not just so-called premises but complete step-by-step storylines in almost every case." None of the supervillains from the comic books ever showed up on the TV series, not even the non-powered Luthor, but that did not stop the show from becoming one of the most beloved depictions of the Man of Steel and a cultural touchstone for the baby boomer generation.

Adventures of Superman ended in both tragedy and mystery. The show had been picked up for a seventh season, with the full cast returning (with the exception of John Hamilton, who had died in October 1958). George Reeves had branched out a bit—he had directed three episodes of the series and was expecting to direct more in the new season. His personal life was also seemingly on the upswing—he was engaged to socialite Leonore Lemmon. But on June 16, 1959, Reeves died at the age of 45 in his bedroom of a gunshot wound to his head. His death was officially ruled a suicide, apparently brought on by his despondency over financial difficulties and having been typecast as Superman and thus unable to find other, more meaningful acting work. (Even when he guest-starred on the top-rated *I Love Lucy* in 1957, it was as Superman.) But speculation persists that there was foul play, perhaps related to Reeves' long-term affair with Toni Mannix, the wife of a Hollywood studio executive with alleged mob ties—Reeves had apparently left Mannix inconsolable when he ended the relationship to be with Lemmon.

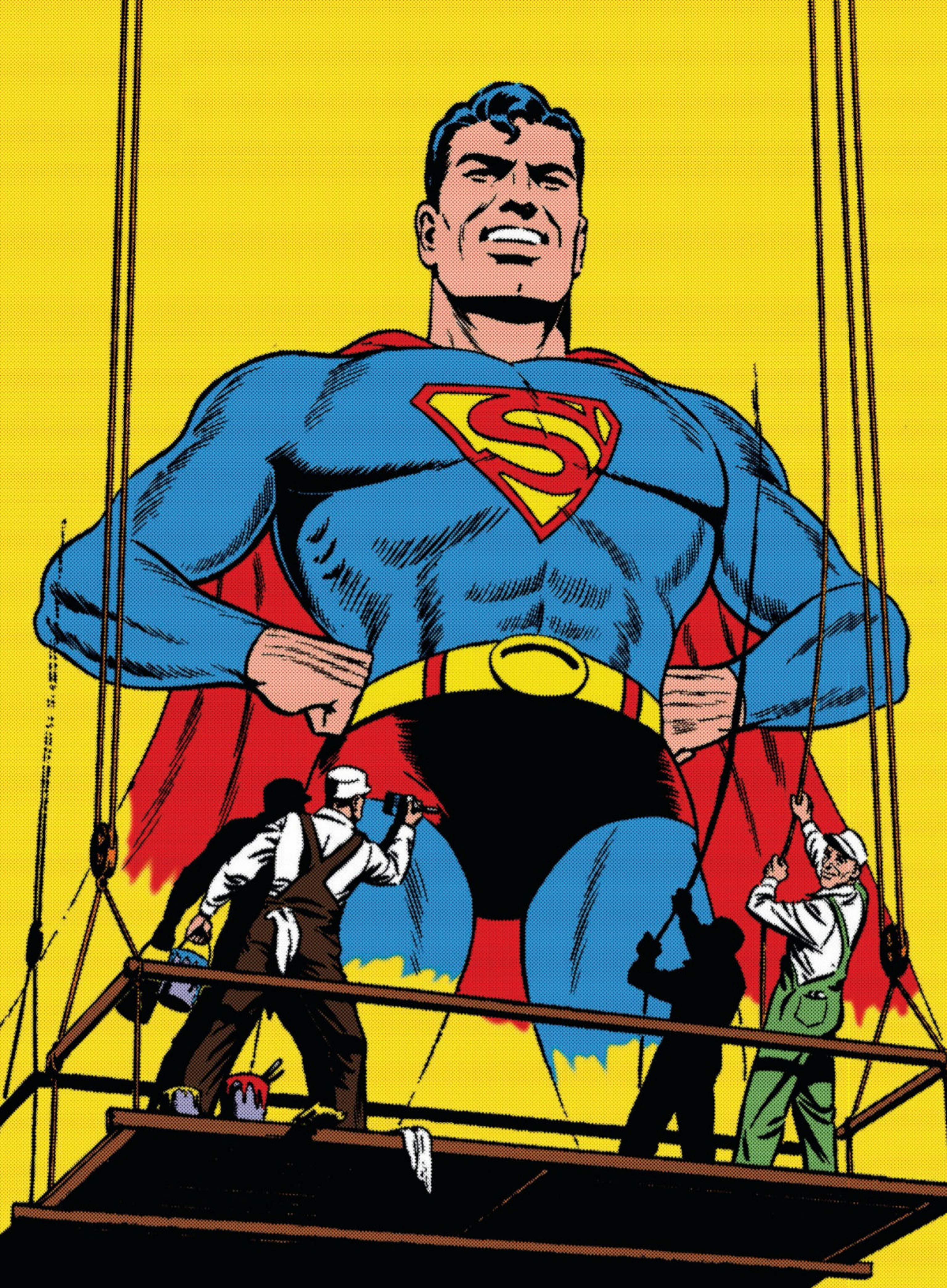
Regardless of the circumstances, George Reeves' death stunned his millions of fans and brought a significant part of Superman's history to a sad and untimely end. But while TV's Superman was dead, the character would live on, and would continue to dominate the superhero world.

CHAPTER 2

AN AMERICAN ICON

Superman became even more powerful
in the 1960s and ’70s

LARGER THAN LIFE
Over the course of two decades, Superman’s comic universe expanded and he gained a movie franchise.



CHAPTER 2

AN AMERICAN ICON

REIGNING SUPREME

A burst of creativity kept Superman at the forefront of the comic book industry

Under editor Mort Weisinger, the Superman comic book canon expanded tremendously. For one thing, it reached the point where it seemed there was nothing that Superman could not do—he was now able to push planets out of their orbits, blow out a star with his super-breath and much, much more. Superman was basically a god, far removed from the social-justice crusader of 1938.

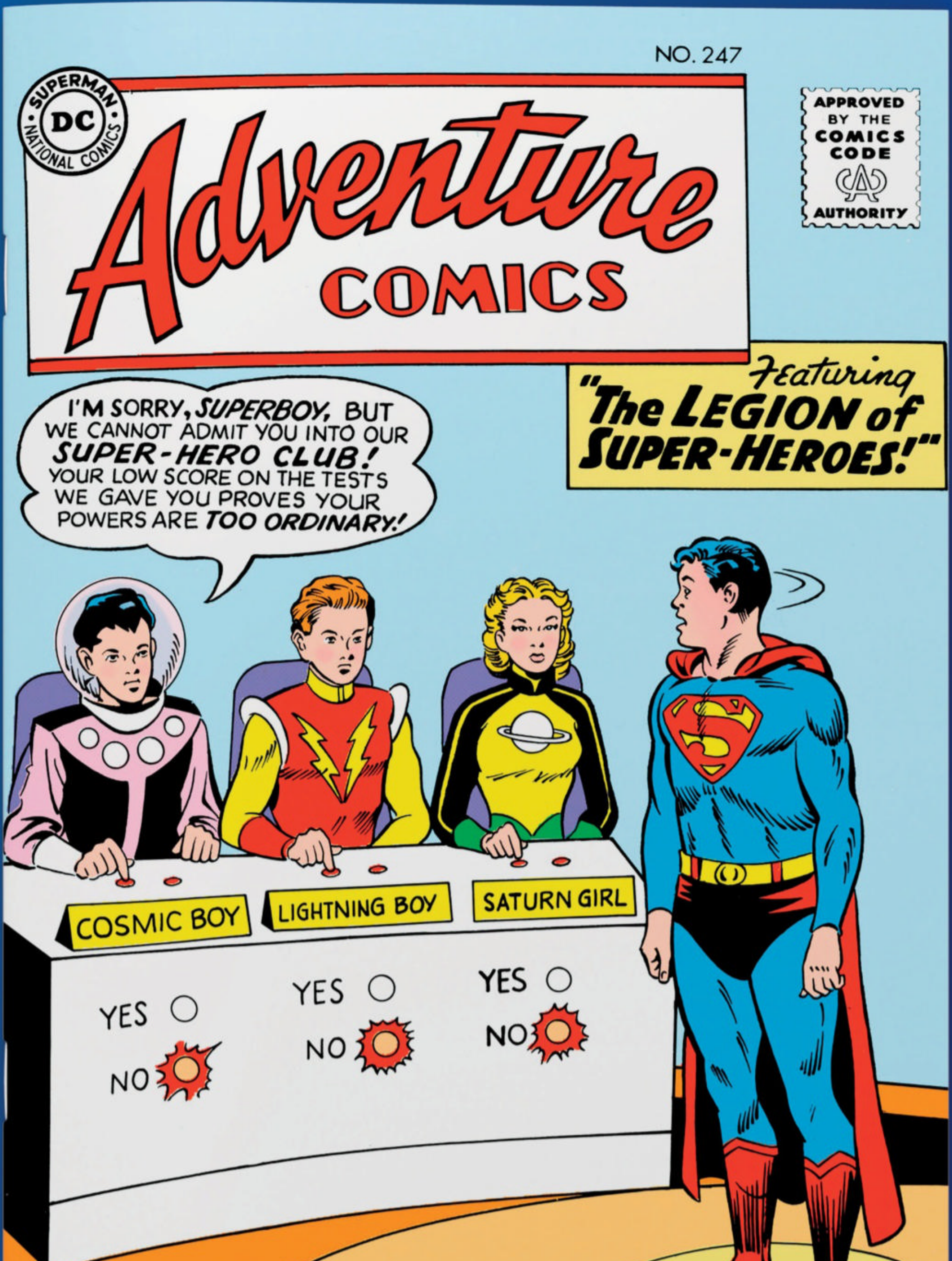
Furthermore, most of the edges had been shaved off the character—he was fairly uncomplicated, virtually flawless and had become something of a parental figure to the readers, the majority of whom Weisinger had pegged to be around 6 to 8 years old.

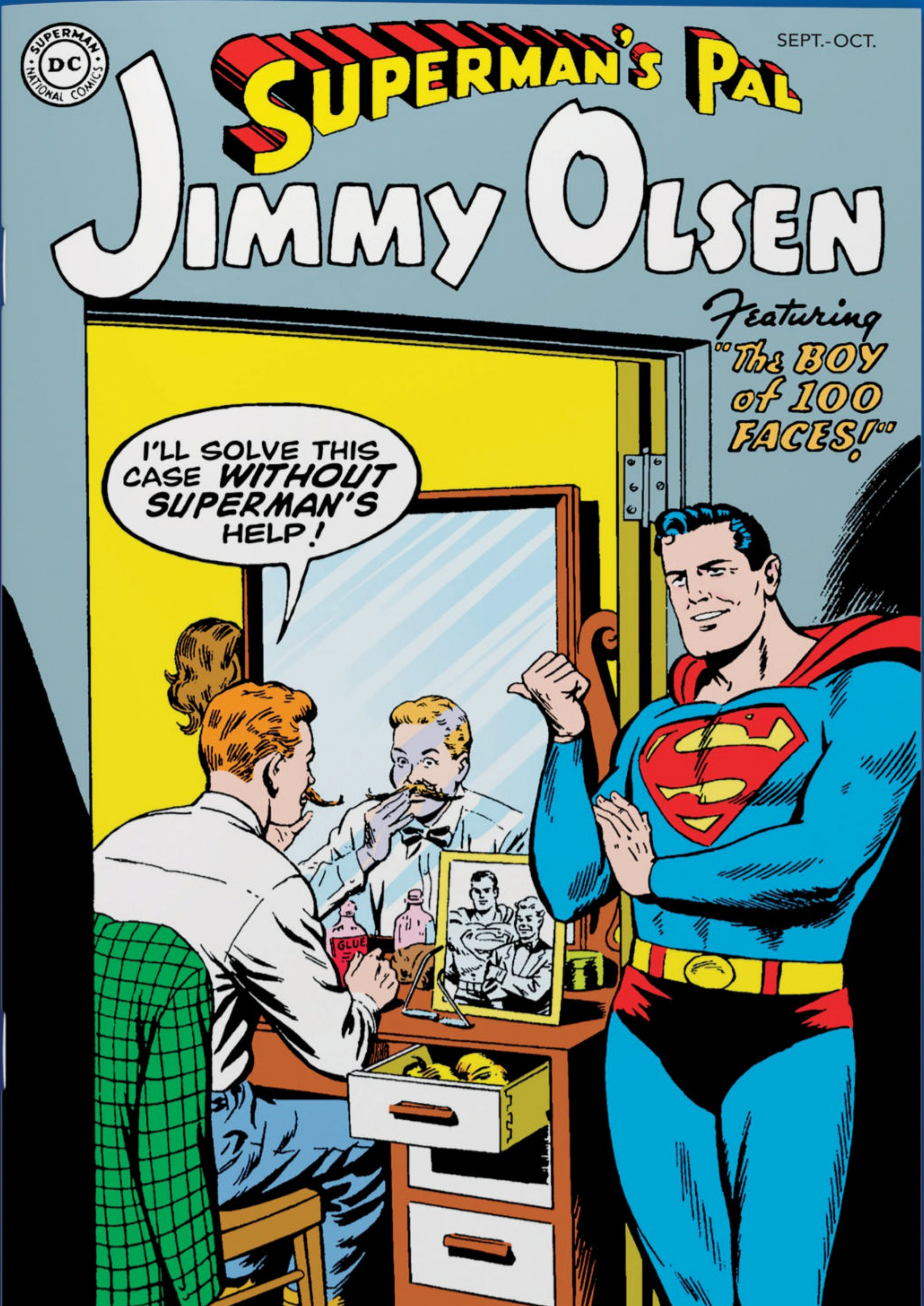
Superman's backstory was further developed as well. In *Adventure Comics* No. 247 (cover dated April 1958), it was revealed that when he was Superboy, he met and became a member of the Legion of Super-Heroes, a team of superpowered teenagers from the 30th century. Inspired by Superboy's legendary exploits from 1,000 years earlier, the Legion's members used their abilities for the benefit of the universe, and Superboy himself frequently traveled across time and space to accompany them on adventures.

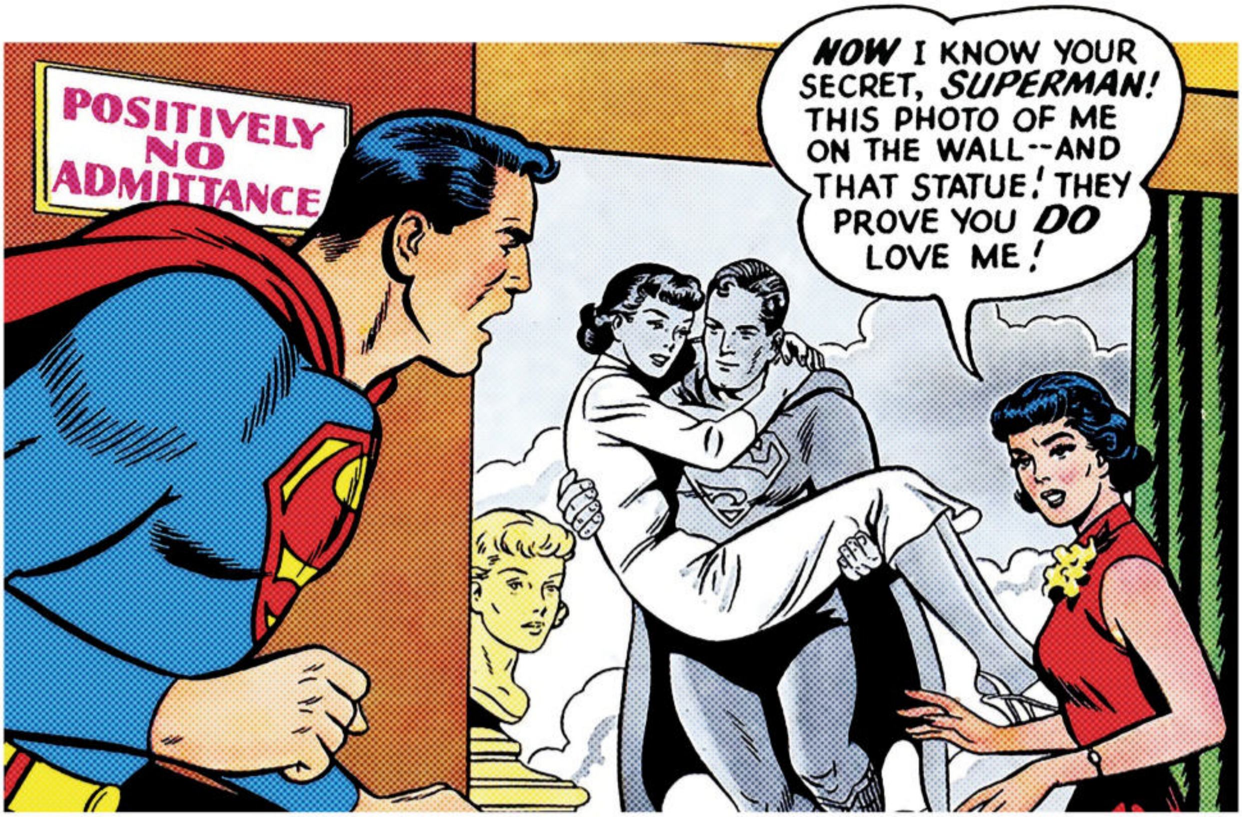
Weisinger, through his writers and artists, also placed greater emphasis on the planet Krypton, its history and its inhabitants, with readers learning there were other survivors of the planet's destruction. *Adventure Comics* No. 210 (cover dated March 1955) introduced Krypto, Superman's pet dog from when he was just baby Kal-El. Krypto had been sent into space by Superman's father, Jor-El, on a test flight in a prototype spaceship that got knocked off course. Years later, the ship landed on Earth, where Krypto gained superpowers and was reunited with Kal-El, who was by then Superboy. In *Action Comics* No. 252 (cover dated May 1959), Superman encountered his cousin Kara, who was sent to Earth from Krypton's Argo City, which had endured on a large fragment of the planet protected by a special dome. As the city became contaminated with kryptonite radiation and the population succumbed, Kara's father, Zor-El—Jor-El's brother—launched her away in a rocket so that she could live on. Kara, of course, became Supergirl, and eventually got her own super-pets: Streaky the Super-Cat and Comet the Super-Horse.

Superman also gained possession of the Kryptonian city of Kandor, which, as revealed in *Action Comics* No. 242 (cover dated July 1958), had been miniaturized, removed from the planet and stored in a bottle decades earlier by the supervillain Brainiac. In the Arctic, Superman built his Fortress of Solitude, introduced in *Action Comics* No. 241 (cover dated June 1958), where he kept Kandor and

POWER SOURCE
In the new rationale, Superman derived his powers from Earth orbiting a yellow sun.


NO. 247
SUPERMAN DC NATIONAL COMICS
APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY
Adventure COMICS
Featuring "The LEGION of SUPER-HEROES!"
I'M SORRY, SUPERBOY, BUT WE CANNOT ADMIT YOU INTO OUR SUPER-HERO CLUB! YOUR LOW SCORE ON THE TESTS WE GAVE YOU PROVES YOUR POWERS ARE TOO ORDINARY!
COSMIC BOY
LIGHTNING BOY
SATURN GIRL
YES ○
NO
YES ○
NO
YES ○
NO


SUPERMAN NATIONAL COMICS DC
SUPERMAN'S PAL
JIMMY OLSEN
SEPT.-OCT.
Featuring "The BOY of 100 FACES!"
I'LL SOLVE THIS CASE WITHOUT SUPERMAN'S HELP!
GLUE


POSITIVELY NO ADMITTANCE
NOW I KNOW YOUR SECRET, SUPERMAN! THIS PHOTO OF ME ON THE WALL--AND THAT STATUE! THEY PROVE YOU DO LOVE ME!

a multitude of other relics and mementos spanning his life, career and heritage.

There was also a new, more scientific rationale for Superman's powers: Instead of the Kryptonians having been a race of supermen, the new explanation was that Krypton had orbited a red sun, under which its people were basically no different from humans. But on Earth, with its yellow sun and lighter gravity, a Kryptonian would become a super-being.

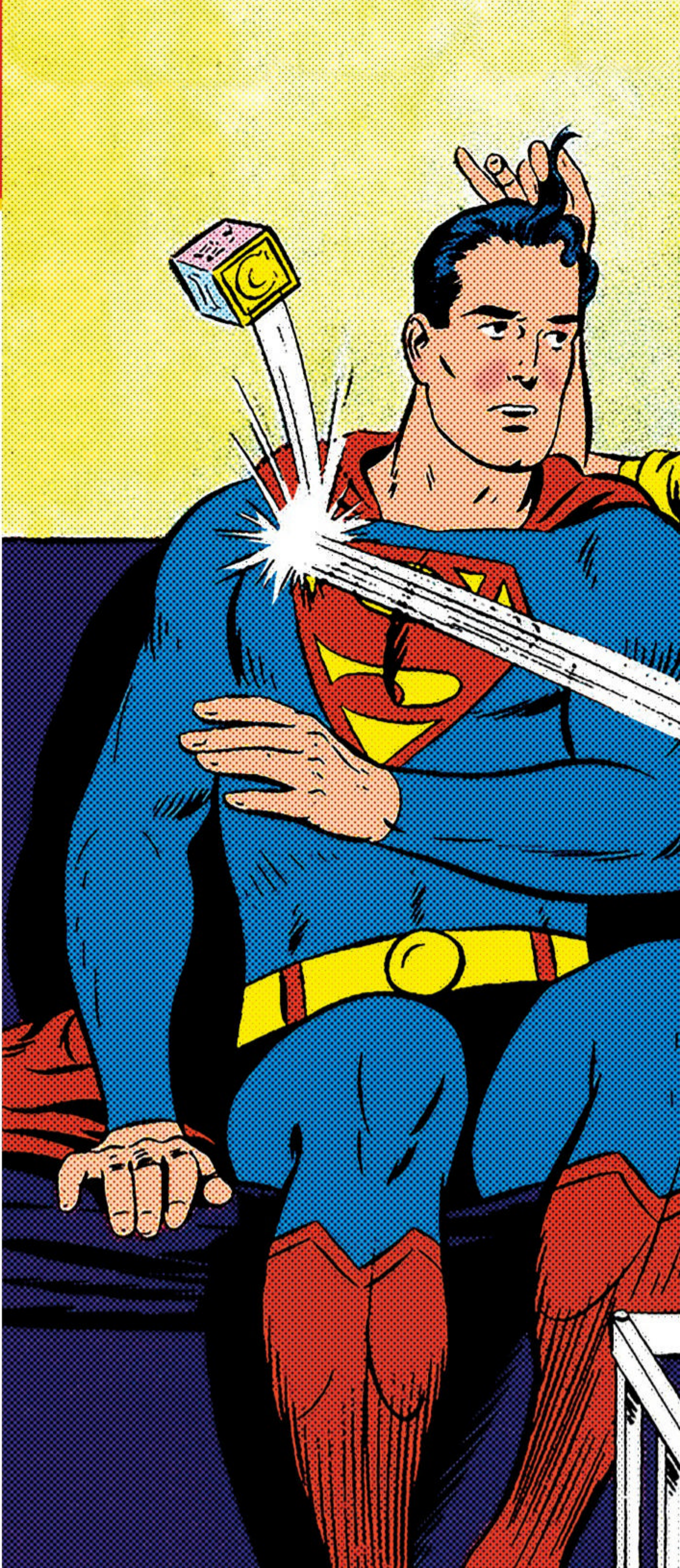
Readers were captivated, and sales figures remained high. "As hokey as it is and as silly as it can be, you have to accept the fact that it was written as fairy tales for children," Superman comic book writer and historian Mark Waid says. "Once you buy into that, you see the inventiveness and the cleverness of the stories and the rapidity with which Weisinger just kept changing up the mythos and bringing new elements in."

The comic book line expanded as well. In addition to *Superman, Action Comics* and *World's Finest Comics,* along with Superboy's appearances in *Adventure Comics* and *Superboy,* there were spin-off titles: *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen,* which launched in 1954, and *Superman's Girl Friend Lois Lane,* which was added in 1958. According to Weisinger, his bosses at National Comics did not think Jimmy and Lois were strong enough as characters to carry their own

> **"As hokey as it is and as silly as it can be, you have to accept the fact that it was written as fairy tales for children."**
>
> **—Mark Waid**

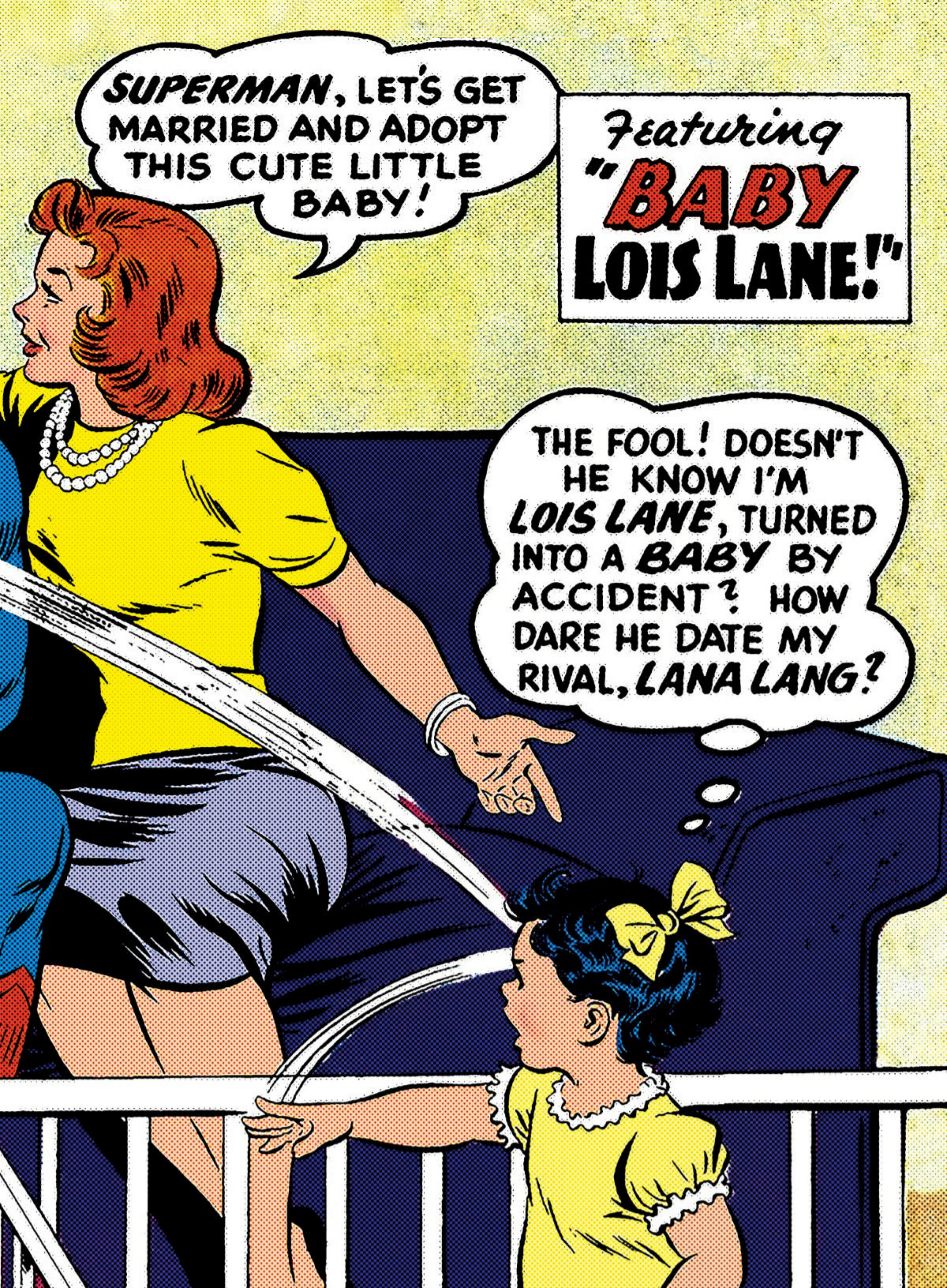
LEADING MAN
Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen (left) launched in 1954, giving the supporting character time to shine.

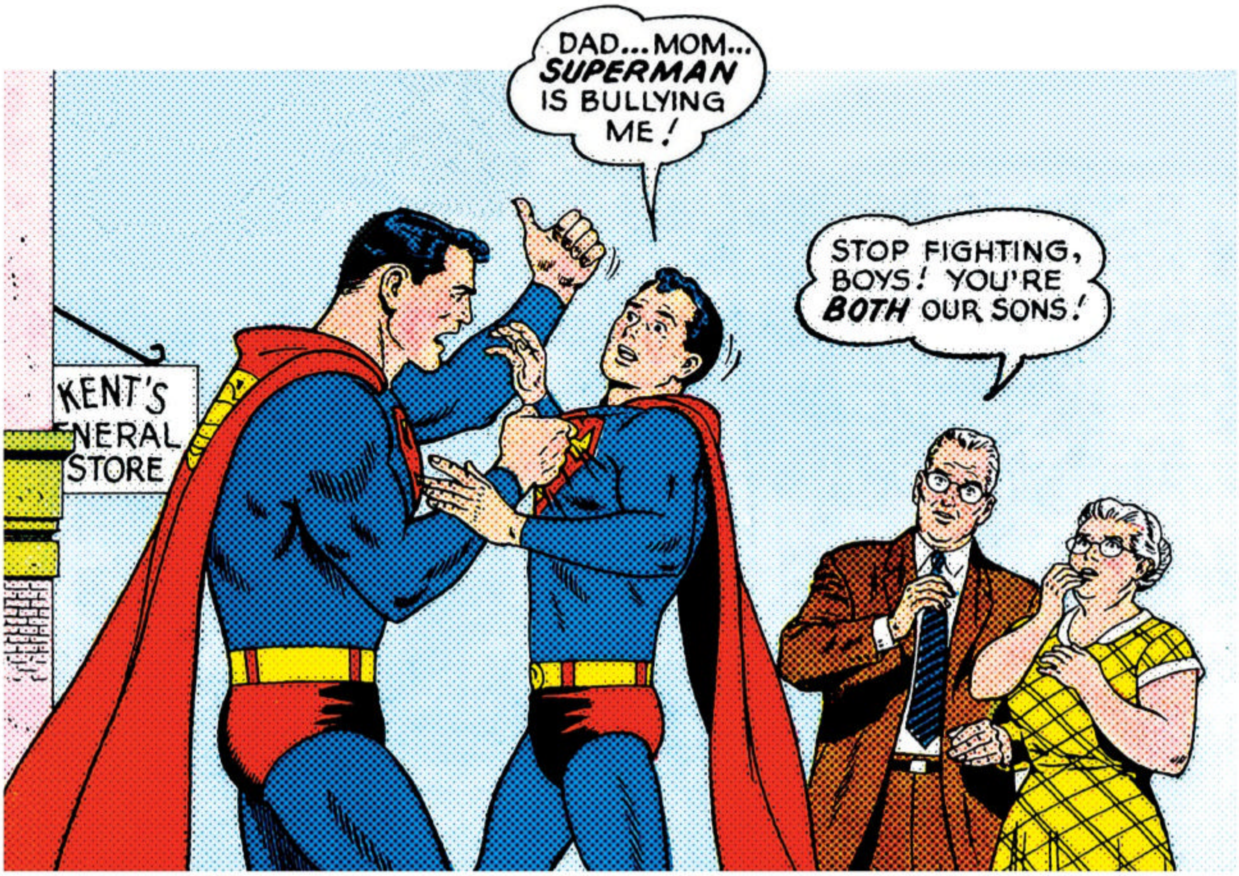
LOIS' LANE
The comic book line's expansion continued with *Superman's Girl Friend Lois Lane* (above) in 1958.



> “The most influential Superman artists during Weisinger’s editorial reign were Wayne Boring and Curt Swan, both of whom helped redefine the look of the character.”

HIGHS AND LOIS
Lois Lane carried her own title from 1958 to 1974, despite National bosses not having faith in the project.


SUPERMAN, LET'S GET MARRIED AND ADOPT THIS CUTE LITTLE BABY!
Featuring "BABY LOIS LANE!"
THE FOOL! DOESN'T HE KNOW I'M LOIS LANE, TURNED INTO A BABY BY ACCIDENT? HOW DARE HE DATE MY RIVAL, LANA LANG?


DAD...MOM... SUPERMAN IS BULLYING ME!
STOP FIGHTING, BOYS! YOU'RE BOTH OUR SONS!
KENT'S ENERAL STORE

magazines. "But I had a gut feeling," he said. "And I talked to kids." Both titles lasted until 1974.

The most influential Superman artists during Weisinger's editorial reign were Wayne Boring and Curt Swan, both of whom helped redefine the look of the character after the departure of Joe Shuster. Swan became the definitive Superman artist in the 1960s and worked on the character regularly until the late 1980s. Weisinger's writers included science-fiction authors Edmond Hamilton and Otto Binder and Batman co-creator Bill Finger. In 1959, Weisinger added another writer—none other than Jerry Siegel. Since his dismissal from Superman, the years had not been kind to Siegel. Unable to find steady work, he was hurting financially. Reportedly, Siegel's wife, Joanne, put him and Weisinger back in touch, which led to his return. Siegel wrote some of the most memorable Superman stories of the era, including "Superman's Return to Krypton," published in *Superman* No. 141 (cover dated November 1960), in which Superman went back in time to his native world before its destruction, met his newly married parents and fell in love. In "The Death of Superman," an out-of-continuity story published in *Superman* No. 149 (cover dated November 1961), Siegel had Lex Luthor, armed with kryptonite, finally succeed in killing the superhero. But since National did not include credits in its comic books at the time, readers were unaware that Siegel was writing any of them. Nevertheless, Siegel's renewed association with Superman (and National) ended in 1965, when he and Shuster launched another ultimately unsuccessful attempt to regain ownership of the character.

As it did the first time Siegel was removed, and the Superman franchise carried on smoothly

HISTORY REPEATS
Readers learned more about Superman's (and Superboy's) background in *Adventure Comics* (above).

SHARP SHOOTER
Jim Shooter (opposite) attends New York Comic Con in 2007. He started writing for Weisinger at 13.

DOES SUPERMAN HAVE THE
POWER TO SAVE HIS CREATO

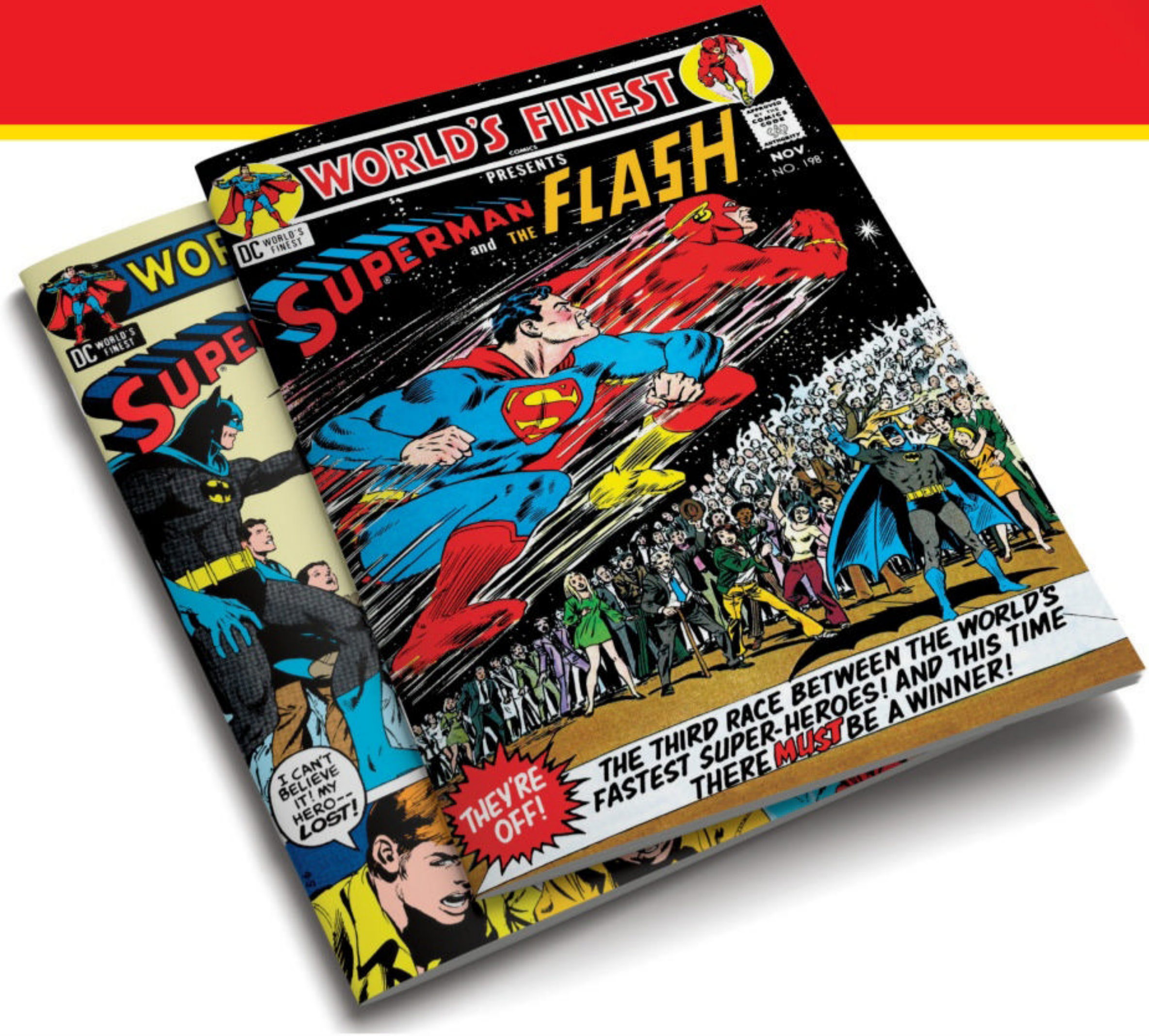
ALL GROWN UP
Superman's canon grew quickly in the '60s and '70s, even without creators Siegel and Shuster (above).

AND THEY'RE OFF!
Jim Shooter wrote the first race between Superman and the Flash, which became a comic tradition (opposite).

and successfully, though not always happily. While Weisinger's creativity, business savvy, and knowledge and understanding of Superman were beyond dispute, he had built a reputation for being cruel, and even sadistic, to the people working for him. Both the praise and the criticism aimed at Weisinger were well deserved, according to Jim Shooter, who started writing comics for Weisinger in 1965, when he was just 13 years old. "Mort was a brilliant man," Shooter says. "He was mean as a snake, but he was brilliant. He was a marketer and very good at this publishing racket—and he tended to get some really good talent working for him."

Weisinger did not treat that talent particularly well, however. One writer, Don Cameron, reportedly tried to throw him out of a window. Binder apparently became so disenchanted writing for Weisinger that he quit the comic book industry altogether. Swan, who said that Weisinger could be "very obnoxious," also quit, having begun to suffer severe headaches resulting from his interactions with the editor. Swan eventually returned, but with a new attitude: He now stood up to Weisinger instead of suppressing his frustration. Boring once said about Weisinger, "I was afraid I'd die and go to hell and he'd be in charge!" Even Siegel was not spared—as Swan recalled, "Many times I'd come in [to the office] to pick up a cover and [Weisinger would] be berating Jerry."

Shooter, who wrote comics to help support his financially struggling family, worked on numerous Superman, Supergirl and Jimmy Olsen stories, as well as Superman/Batman team-up adventures for *World's Finest Comics*. He conceived and wrote the first story in which Superman competed in a race against the Flash, which became something of a tradition in the comics and was referenced in the 2017 theatrical version of the *Justice League* movie.


WORLD'S FINEST COMICS
PRESENTS
SUPERMAN and THE FLASH
NOV. NO. 198
THE THIRD RACE BETWEEN THE WORLD'S FASTEST SUPER-HEROES! AND THIS TIME THERE MUST BE A WINNER!
THEY'RE OFF!
I CAN'T BELIEVE IT! MY HERO--LOST!

> **“[Weisinger] was mean as a snake, but he was brilliant … and he tended to get some really good talent working for him.”**
>
> **—Jim Shooter**

Shooter’s primary assignment was the “Superboy and the Legion of Super-Heroes” feature in *Adventure Comics*, which he wrote for about three years. He and Weisinger had regular story sessions over the phone to discuss the work he had sent in (Weisinger was in New York City, while Shooter lived in Pittsburgh). “He would say to me, ‘You moron, why can’t you spell? What the hell is *this* supposed to be?’ A lot of foul language,” Shooter explains. “This big important man from New York is calling this 14-year-old [kid] and telling [me I’m] a moron, so I thought I was a moron. A couple of those conversations ended with me saying, ‘I guess maybe I’m just not good enough to do this, maybe you should get someone else.’ And he’d say, ‘No, I’ll give you one more chance. You are my charity case’—because he knew my family needed the money.” Shooter later learned that Weisinger often praised his work around the office and proudly referred to him as “my discovery”—but never conveyed any of that to Shooter directly. “That was his M.O.,” Shooter says.

Weisinger’s abrasive management style was well known throughout the company, but with the sales figures he was generating—according to Shooter, *Adventure Comics*, which didn’t even feature Superman, consistently sold half a million copies each month—he was about as invincible as Superman himself. But at the twilight of the 1960s, Superman faced a challenge even greater than Lex Luthor or kryptonite: the rise of Marvel Comics and its approach to superheroes, which threatened to make the Man of Tomorrow seem like the Man of Yesterday.

CHAPTER 2

AN AMERICAN ICON

CHANGING TIMES

With stiffening competition and slipping sales, Superman faced a transition

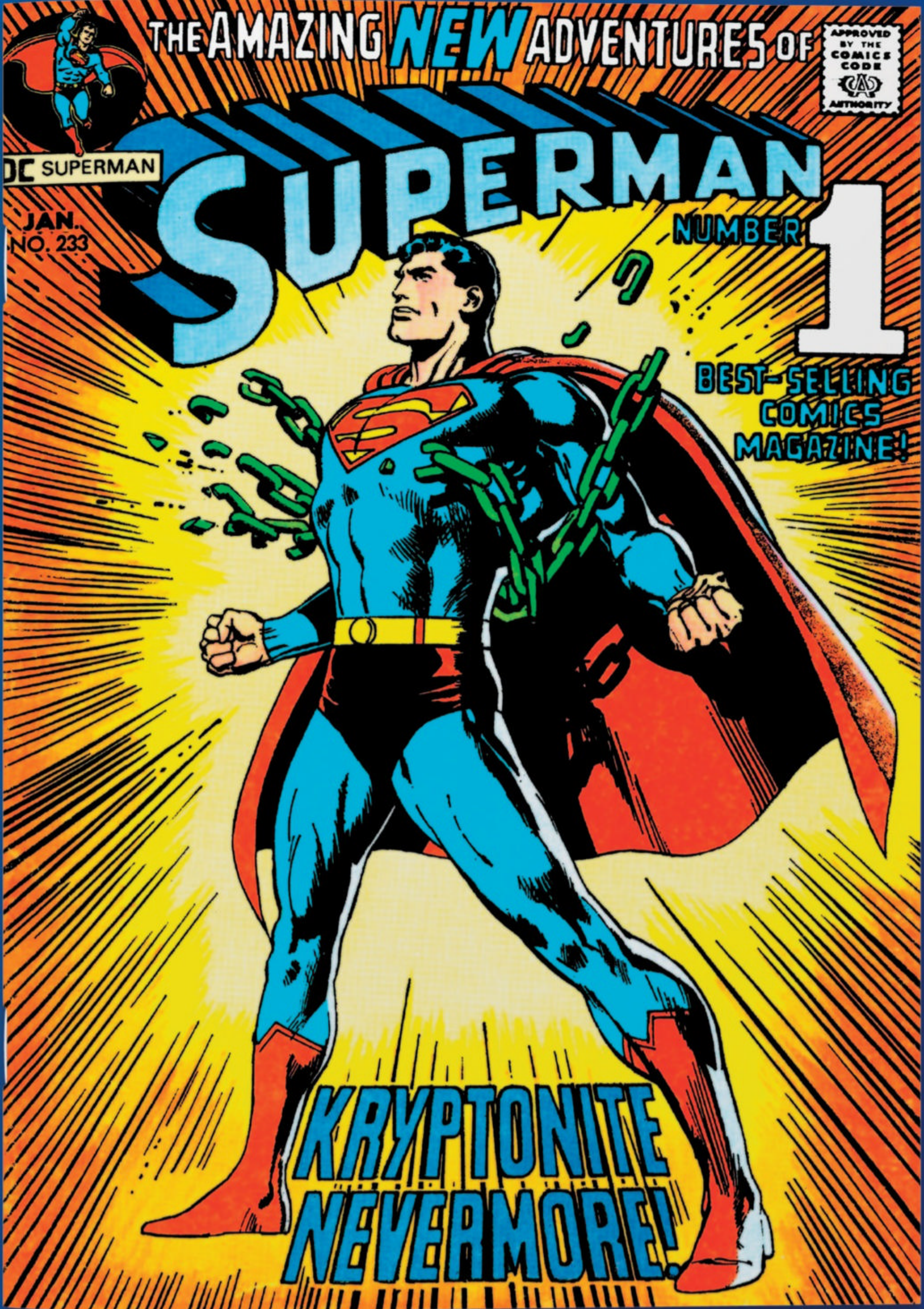
By the end of the 1960s, Marvel Comics, guided by editor/head writer Stan Lee, was giving National Comics—now known as DC Comics—a run for its money. Lee, in collaboration with artists including Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko and John Romita Sr., had taken a revolutionary approach to superhero comics, portraying the heroes as relatively complex and imperfect, with tumultuous private lives and personal problems that made them more relatable and intriguing to readers. As a result, Marvel was able to build an audience that stuck around until college and even beyond, in stark contrast to DC's longstanding view that the comic book audience was generally 6 to 8 years old and turned over every three years. Superman was still on top, but Marvel's heroes, particularly Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four, were gaining ground—and DC's editors had difficulty understanding why.

"When I started out writing Superman [in 1966], it was selling about 1.2 million copies an issue," Jim Shooter says. "[Editor Mort Weisinger] was masterful at selling comics in the '50s and early '60s. ... But during the last [few] years of the '60s, DC's sales were falling dramatically. ... There was a sea change in the business that caught them totally by surprise. All of a sudden, Stan had ushered in this older audience and it changed the paradigm—and DC just wasn't ready for that." As Shooter recalls, there were meetings at DC where the editors looked at Marvel's titles and were baffled. "They figured, 'Maybe the kids like crude artwork,'" he says. "[Their attitude was that] DC had all the best artists and the Marvel books had 'childish drawings.' I'd heard that DC seriously considered asking their artists to 'draw worse.'"

Shooter was not alone in feeling that DC was falling behind and too slow in responding. "All of the stuff was a little dated," writer Marv Wolfman says, adding that DC's stories were typically short on characterization and exciting battles, unlike Marvel's. Wolfman, whose professional comic book writing career began at DC in 1968—when he was in his early 20s—has written Superman stories in every decade since then. He also worked briefly as an assistant editor at DC and says the senior editors often belittled Marvel's output.

"When you're No. 1, and DC was No. 1 for decades, you start to feel like you know it all, even as the times change," he says. "The guys at DC honestly felt that they were doing the best comics out there. But with any creative industry, if you don't keep advancing, people get bored, because it's the same old, same old." According to Wolfman, the Superman titles of

SCIENCE RULES
In *Superman* No. 233 (right), a science experiment gone awry turns all kryptonite on Earth into harmless iron.


THE AMAZING NEW ADVENTURES OF
APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY
DC SUPERMAN
SUPERMAN
JAN. NO. 233
NUMBER 1
BEST-SELLING COMICS MAGAZINE!
KRYPTONITE NEVERMORE!

the era felt like an endless stream of stories about Lex Luthor escaping from prison to battle Superman only to be defeated, and Lois Lane trying to figure out Superman's secret identity. "They were great stories when I was 8 years old, and that's the audience they were aiming for," he says. "But the audience changed." By 1972, Wolfman was working for Marvel, where he would occasionally take potshots at DC on the editorial pages, knocking the company for being behind the times and publishing cardboard figures instead of actual characters.

Change did come to DC in 1970, when Mort Weisinger retired and his longtime friend and colleague Julius Schwartz took over as editor on *Superman*. From the start, Schwartz set out to shake things up. He brought in a popular young writer, Dennis O'Neil, who, working with superstar artist Neal Adams, had recently revitalized Batman in an acclaimed run of stories that Schwartz had edited. Wanting to make Superman more grounded, O'Neil introduced an interdimensional creature that drained the Man of Steel of roughly half his power, leaving him no longer able to, as O'Neil put it, "destroy a galaxy by listening hard." Schwartz and O'Neil also worked to eliminate the various cliches that had built up around Superman over the years—first and foremost, all of the kryptonite on Earth, which had become a storytelling crutch. O'Neil's first issue, *Superman* No. 233 (cover dated January 1971), opened with a science experiment gone haywire, resulting in a chain reaction that transformed all kryptonite on Earth into harmless iron.

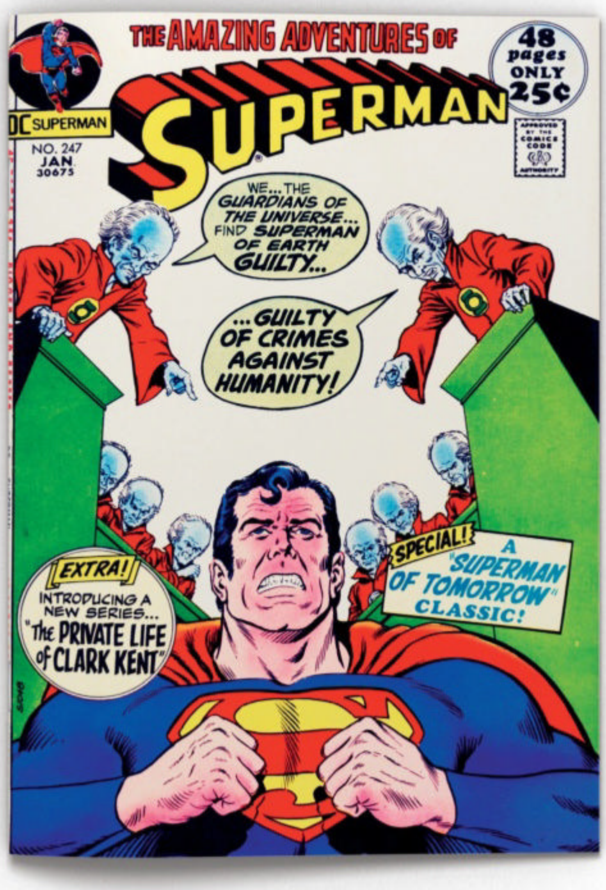
An effort to modernize the series brought changes to Superman's alter ego, as well. Clark Kent started dressing more fashionably, no longer limited to a plain dark-blue suit, white dress shirt, and red tie. More significantly, Kent had a new job—he moved from being a reporter for the *Daily Planet* newspaper to serving as an on-air television reporter for Metropolis' WGBS.

But by O'Neil's own admission, he was not a good fit for Superman and left within a year. Schwartz

remained, but he apparently felt the weight of the long-established Superman canon and realized the Man of Steel was about as resistant to permanent changes as he was to bullets. Superman was soon back up to full, near-infinite power and eventually more kryptonite landed on Earth. The only thing that stuck was Clark Kent's job as a TV newsman.

Following O'Neil's departure, Schwartz hired another young writer, Elliot S! Maggin, whose involvement with Superman would continue for the next 15 years. Maggin was in college when he sold his first Superman story, "Must There Be a Superman?" Published in *Superman* No. 247 (cover dated January 1972), it involved Superman beginning to wonder how his many and varied actions to benefit humanity might actually be stunting its growth and development—a bit more reflective than the usual fare of the time. "I thought the character should be more self-aware, more conscious of how he came across in what he was doing and whether he was causing any harm in the course of doing what he perceived as good," Maggin says. "I don't think I consciously made [the comic] more sophisticated than it had been, but I was always striving to make it more respected, respectable, well thought of. It was still the best-selling comic book, about 300,000 to 500,000 copies a month, and Superman was appearing regularly in about seven books."

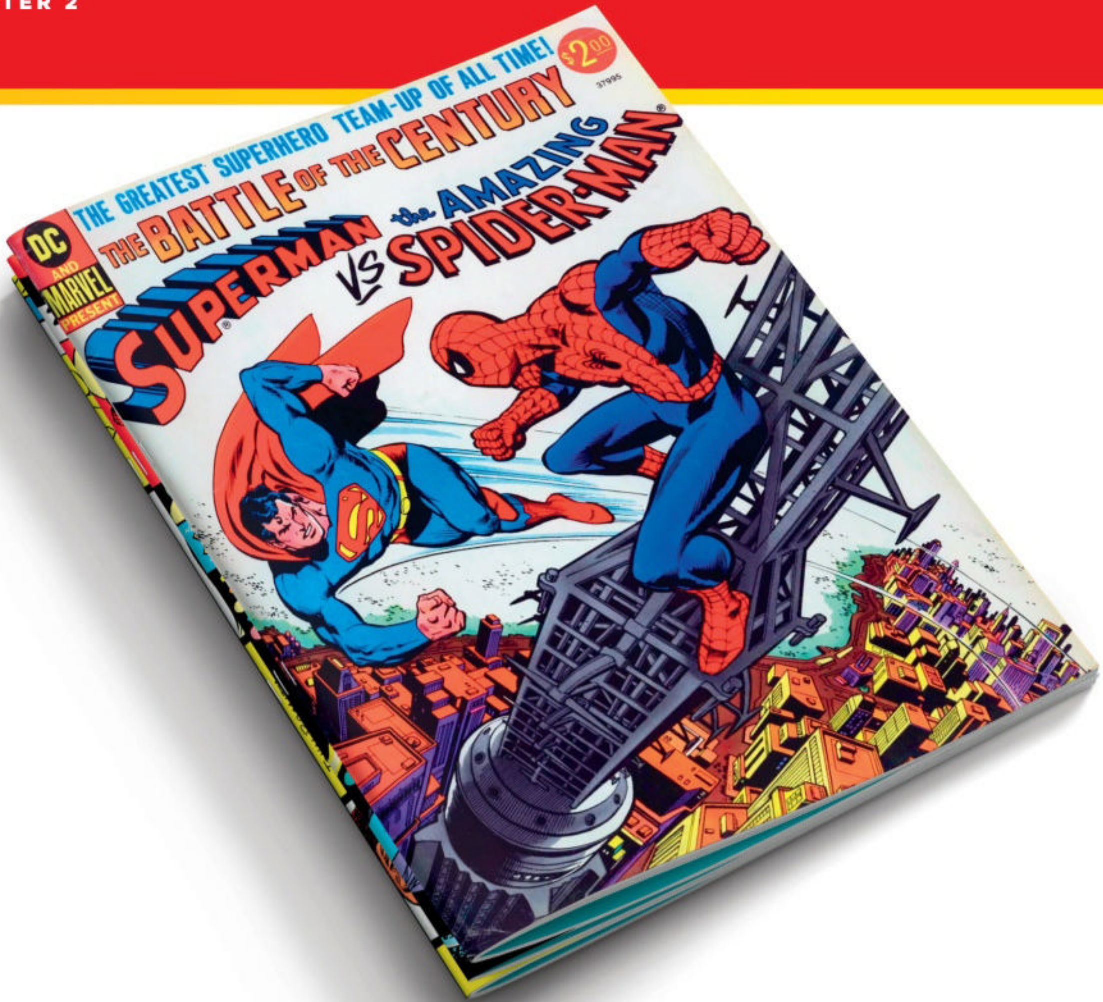
Still, Marvel had gained enough popularity—and market share—that by 1976, amid a long sales slump that affected the entire comic book industry, DC agreed to a "crossover" book that had previously been considered impossible: *Superman vs. The Amazing Spider-Man*. The 92-page story was written by Gerry Conway, one of the few people at the time who had worked on both characters. "DC's only concern was that Superman look good and Marvel's concern was that Spider-Man look good," he said in 2012. "My concern was that we produce a book that was fun to read. ... It was a hoot!" It was also a major event, a huge seller, and is today considered a classic. (A sequel, written by Jim Shooter, was published in 1981, giving Shooter a chance to write Superman again under the most unique of circumstances—at the time, he was Marvel's editor-in-chief.)


THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF
SUPERMAN
48 pages ONLY 25¢
APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY
DC SUPERMAN
NO. 247 JAN 30675
WE... THE GUARDIANS OF THE UNIVERSE... FIND SUPERMAN OF EARTH GUILTY...
...GUILTY OF CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY!
EXTRA! INTRODUCING A NEW SERIES... "The PRIVATE LIFE of CLARK KENT"
SPECIAL! A "SUPERMAN OF TOMORROW" CLASSIC!

> **"I thought the character should be more self-aware, more conscious of how he came across in what he was doing and whether he was causing any harm in the course of doing what he perceived as good."**
>
> **—Elliot S! Maggin**

WRITER BLOCKS
Marv Wolfman (far left) and Elliot S! Maggin wrote comics starting in 1968 and 1971, respectively.

EXISTENTIAL ANGST
In Elliot S! Maggin's first Superman story (above), the hero gets introspective about his actions.


$2.00
DC AND MARVEL PRESENT
THE GREATEST SUPERHERO TEAM-UP OF ALL TIME!
THE BATTLE OF THE CENTURY
SUPERMAN VS the AMAZING SPIDER-MAN

> “DC’s only concern was that Superman look good, and Marvel’s concern was that Spider-Man look good. My concern was that we produce a book that was fun to read.”
> —Gerry Conway

Meanwhile, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were making headlines after the announcement that a big-budget Superman movie was in the works. Both men were now in their 60s, almost destitute and in declining health—Shuster was nearly blind. Siegel was incensed about the forthcoming movie, well aware that he and Shuster would not see a cent from it. In October 1975 he launched a public-relations campaign with a 10-page press release in which he detailed his longstanding grievances with DC. Siegel said that he had put a curse on the movie, hoping it would bomb, and accused the DC executives he had worked under—singling out Jack Liebowitz—of having cheated him and Shuster and having “killed my days, murdered my nights, choked my happiness, strangled my career. … For most of the 37 years of Superman’s publication [Shuster and I] have received NOTHING from our creation.”

Neal Adams, by then one of the most popular, influential, important and outspoken artists in the comic book industry, threw his support behind

CROSSOVER ACTION
DC’s Superman and Marvel’s Spider-Man crossed paths in 1976, during an industry-wide sales slump.

HIDDEN FIGURE
Jerry Robinson (right), photographed here in 2009, is the uncredited co-creator of the Joker and Robin.

HA
A

THE FIGHT TO SAVE EARTH FROM STAR-WARRIORS
SUPERMAN VS. MUHAMMAD ALI
BATMAN
Detective Comics
BATMAN AND BATGIRL
THE ART OF NEAL ADAMS
SUPERMAN
SPECTRE
WEIRD WAR

ADAMS TAKES ACTION
Artist Neal Adams, pictured in 1979, supported Shuster and Siegel as they sought credit for their creation.

TOYBOY
X-MEN

> **“I was trying to create a conversation where people would say, ‘Yes, they need to be taken care of, these are the creators of Superman.’”**
> **—Neal Adams**

Siegel and Shuster, as did former Batman artist Jerry Robinson, the uncredited co-creator of the Joker and Robin. They helped spread the word about Siegel and Shuster’s plight and attracted considerable media attention that put DC and its parent company, Warner Communications, on the defensive and in a negative light. “I was trying to create a conversation where people would say, ‘Yes, they need to be taken care of, these are the creators of Superman,’” Adams explained in 2017.

Warner ultimately agreed to give Siegel and Shuster an annual stipend of $20,000 (later raised to $30,000) as well as health benefits, and to include their credit as the creators of Superman on all content featuring the character. With peace finally established, attention could be focused on arguably the biggest media event ever tied to the Man of Steel: the production of *Superman: The Movie*.

SUPER SOLUTION
After years of animosity, Siegel and Shuster were awarded annual stipends, health benefits and credit.

CHAPTER 2

AN AMERICAN ICON

HOLLYWOOD... AND BUST

Superman soared at the movies—but turmoil behind the scenes made him crash back to Earth

Released in the U.S. on Dec. 15, 1978, *Superman: The Movie* boasted an impressive array of talent. The screenplay was developed by Mario Puzo, author of the best-selling novel *The Godfather* and co-screenwriter of its phenomenally successful movie adaptation. The cast was headed by Marlon Brando, in the role of Jor-El, and Gene Hackman, portraying Lex Luthor. In Christopher Reeve, the movie showcased a perfect match of actor and title role. Plus, it featured one of the most powerful and evocative musical scores ever, composed by the legendary John Williams.

Director Richard Donner, upon being hired by the father-son production team of Alexander and Ilya Salkind, overhauled the script with his creative consultant, screenwriter Tom Mankiewicz, to do what had never really been done before: not just a faithful cinematic adaptation of a comic book character, but also a respectful one, with the epic scope and spectacular visual effects that the concept called for. Donner had read and enjoyed the Superman comic books as a child and understood the character's status as an American icon—and that the movie, therefore, needed to be handled with care, dignity and a specific approach. "There's a thing that I call verisimilitude," Donner said in an interview for the film's 40th anniversary. "By that I mean that within its own reality, it was extremely important that the characters in the story believed themselves. ... [Tom and I] strove to bring that sense of reality." Without it, Donner said, the movie would be a parody.

Ilya Salkind, 75, says he too had read the Superman comic books as a child, and that after co-producing back-to-back successes, *The Three Musketeers* (1973) and *The Four Musketeers* (1974), with his father, he suggested they take on the Man of Steel next. "My father had no idea what

MAN OF STEEL
Christopher Reeve's performance as Superman in 1978's *Superman: The Movie* (right) is widely praised.

> **“Infused with wit, warmth and humanity … [*Superman: The Movie*] influenced numerous filmmakers working in the genre today.”**

Superman was,” Salkind says. “I explained that he had superpowers, that he was a force for good. My father checked with his backers and came back to me and said, ‘They like it, so let’s do it.’” After negotiating with Warner Publishing, which oversaw DC Comics, the Salkinds bought the film rights for $4 million. Ilya says that he, like Donner, was committed to taking Superman seriously and avoiding the campiness that had been associated with superheroes since the *Batman* TV series of the 1960s. “That was the main reason for the success of the movie,” he says.

Without a doubt, another main reason was the performance—or rather, the *performances*—of Christopher Reeve as Superman and Clark Kent. Reeve was the first actor in live action who truly played the two identities as separate characters, making it believable that Superman could maintain a secret identity using a pair of glasses and a different hairstyle. He not only played Clark as timid and nerdy—based in part on Cary Grant’s performance in the 1938 film *Bringing Up Baby*—he also slumped his shoulders and slouched, making himself seem shorter than Superman, spoke in a higher-pitched voice and physically exuded awkwardness. As Superman, he projected strength, determination, compassion and sincerity. “I don’t think you’ll ever find a better Superman than Christopher Reeve,” Salkind says.

Reeve’s Superman was the Superman of the comic books, whom writer Jim Shooter describes as “the most noble person in the world—Sir Galahad with superpowers.” In *Superman: The Movie*, this noble character was essentially dropped into the real world, where the American people were coping with the aftermath of a scandal-plagued presidential administration and the demoralizing end of a long

CAPED WONDER
STUNS CITY

DOUBLE IDENTITY
Reeve projected strength and sincerity in his portrayal of Superman, in contrast to his timid, nerdy Clark Kent.

CASTING CALL
In *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner (top, left), Marlon Brando (bottom, left) played Jor-El.

FAMILIAR FACES
Superman II brought back Margot Kidder (above, left), Ned Beatty and Gene Hackman (above, right).

MORE OR LESTER
Director Richard Lester (right) took over *Superman II* and led *Superman III* with diminishing returns.

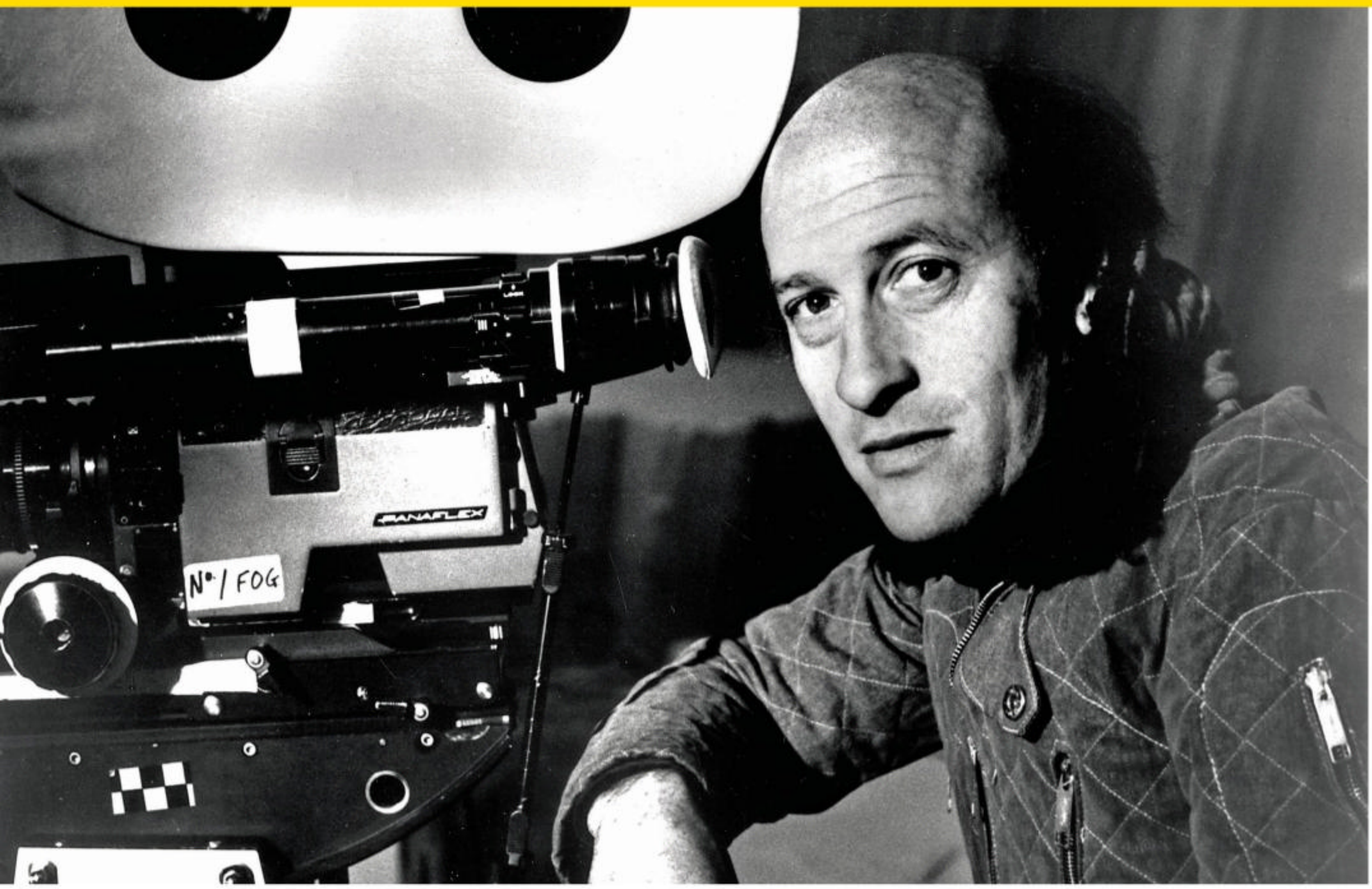
> **“[The Superman movie series] could have gone on for decades. We had bought the rights for 25 years.”**
> **—Ilya Salkind**

military conflict overseas. When Reeve’s Superman solemnly tells Margot Kidder’s Lois Lane that he’s here “to fight for truth and justice and the American way,” she laughs and tells him, “You’re going to end up fighting every elected official in this country.” Yes, the world around Superman is more jaded, more cynical, but he’s not—and the audience is rooting for him. “I’m a fan of very hopeful things,” Donner said.

Salkind says Donner, who died in 2021, was “a very good director, he had a fantastic enthusiasm and was always very, very ‘up.’ He would try everything.” That openness to experimentation resulted in state-of-the-art visual effects that ensured the movie lived up to the promise in its advertising campaign: “You’ll believe a man can fly.”

With a budget of $55 million, *Superman: The Movie* was the most expensive movie ever made up to that point—and emerged a superhero at the box office, earning more than $300 million worldwide to become one of the highest-grossing movies of the 1970s. Infused with wit, warmth and humanity amid the spectacle, it influenced numerous filmmakers working in the genre today—in particular, Christopher Nolan cited Donner’s *Superman* as a key source of inspiration and guidance for his 2005 film, *Batman Begins*, as did Patty Jenkins with 2017’s *Wonder Woman*.

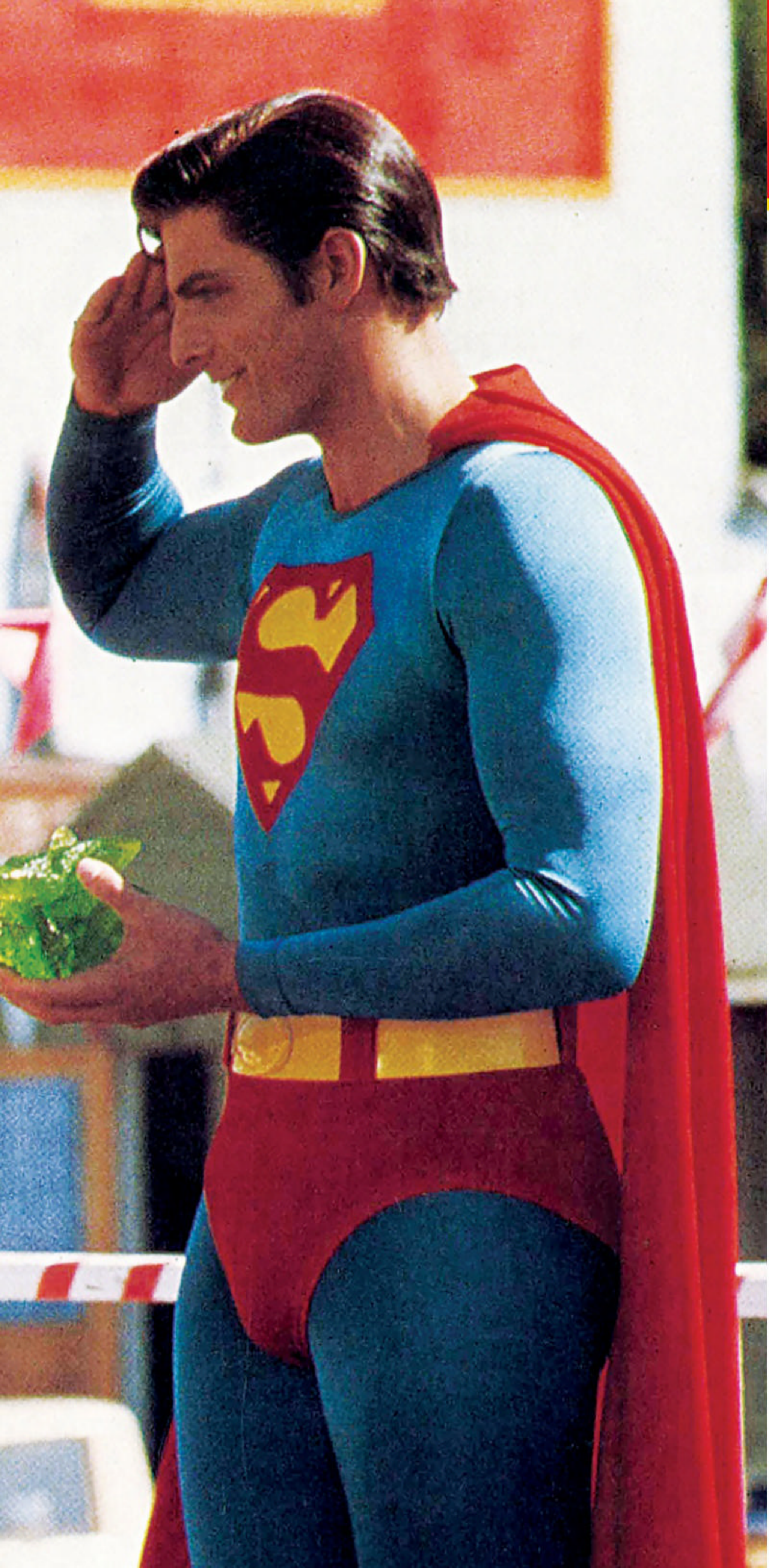
There was always going to be a sequel—most of *Superman II* was filmed at the same time as its predecessor. But an escalating conflict between Donner and the Salkinds led to Donner being fired. According to Ilya Salkind, the root of the conflict was that Donner’s methodical directing style and penchant for experimentation slowed the production down and caused budget overruns. Donner, however, long attested that the Salkinds had never given him a final budget—that they had actually kept it from him. Richard Lester, who had directed the Salkinds’ *Musketeers* movies and was perhaps best known for having directed the Beatles in *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965), was brought in to finish *Superman II*.



In addition to filming the scenes that Donner had not yet shot, Lester reshot numerous scenes that Donner had already filmed, so that he could qualify for a sole directing credit. The end result, released in the U.S. on June 19, 1981, was another hit, receiving praise from critics and audiences and earning more than $190 million worldwide. But it was a patchwork, stitching together the conflicting visions of two different directors: While Donner approached the material with reverence and realism, Lester had little regard for it and inserted silly, even bizarre comedy bits, most notably during a key sequence in which three superpowered criminals from Krypton attack the city of Metropolis. (A re-edited version of the film, *Superman II: The Richard Donner Cut*, which restored Donner's footage, was released on DVD in 2006.)

Lester returned to direct 1983's *Superman III* and took the material even less seriously, sidelining Superman for much of the film to focus on the antics of a comedic quasi-villain played by Richard Pryor. The film was met with mixed reviews and a diminished performance at the box office, earning $80 million worldwide. Ilya Salkind acknowledges that the shift in tone hurt the film. "Lester was a wonderful director," he says. "But he had a tendency to do humor and slapstick and there was too much of that in *Superman III*. That's the only thing I regret—the rest of it was not bad at all."

The Salkinds had envisioned the Superman movie series as having the same longevity as James Bond. "It could have gone on for decades," Ilya Salkind says. "We had bought the rights for 25 years." But after three movies, it was undeniably in decline. Christopher Reeve said he was finished with the role, and a Salkind-produced spin-off movie featuring Superman's cousin, 1984's *Supergirl*, flopped badly, earning roughly $14 million worldwide off an estimated budget of $35 million. When the independent production company Cannon Films offered the Salkinds $5 million in 1985 to buy the Superman film rights, the Salkinds accepted.



THREE TOO MANY? *Superman III* got mixed reviews and only took in $80 million worldwide at the box office.

Cannon's owners, Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus, saw Superman as their ticket to the big time in Hollywood, but they did not seem to fully appreciate the property, or what was needed to do it justice. They did manage to lure both Reeve and Gene Hackman back into the fold—Reeve was paid a reported $5 million and given creative control, which he intended to use to restore the series to its original glory. However, just before filming began, Cannon slashed the budget, originally set at around $35 million, by more than half. The lack of resources was obvious in the finished product. Directed by Sidney J. Furie, 1987's *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* was a mix of substandard visual effects, sloppy writing and careless editing that at times rendered the narrative incomprehensible. The film earned $36.7 million worldwide and is widely considered not only one of the worst superhero movies ever made, but one of the worst movies in general. "The less said about *Superman IV*, the better," Reeve wrote in his 1999 autobiography, *Still Me*. "It was awful," Ilya Salkind says. "And that was it, that was the end."

It was indeed the end for the Superman movie series, for a good long while. In the comic books, however, Superman was in the midst of a new beginning—one that, in many ways, embraced the key elements of his cinematic incarnation.

COMICAL CRIMINALS
Richard Pryor and Pamela Stephenson (opposite, from left) in a scene from *Superman III*.

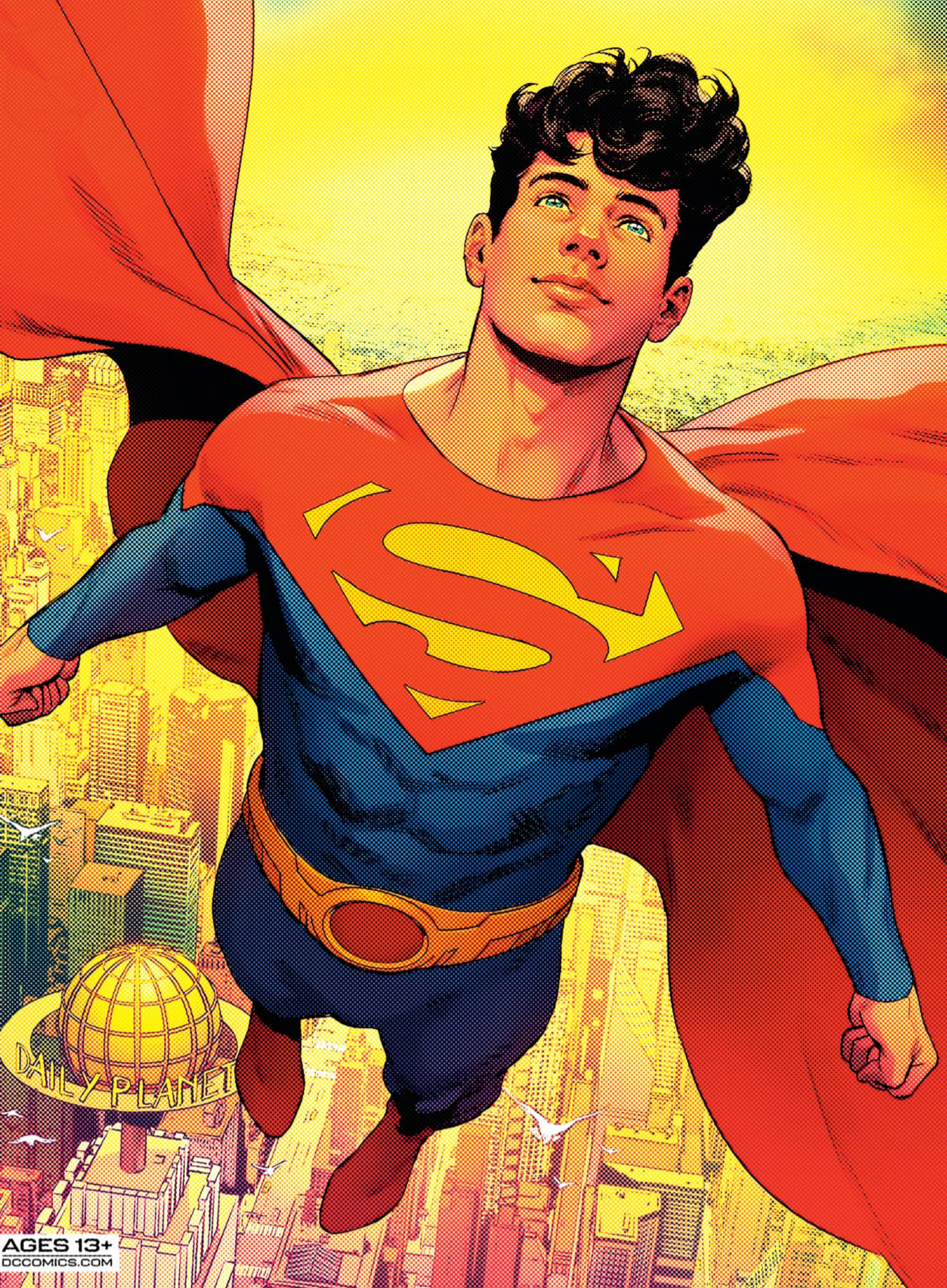
CRASH LANDING
"The less said about *Superman IV*, the better," Reeve wrote about the film (above) in his autobiography.

CHAPTER 3

SUPERMAN TODAY

Evolving the iconic Man of Steel has been an ongoing process

INTO THE UNKNOWN
Superman’s modern era has been marked by many reboots and resets, including one in which he has a teenage son.


DAILY PLANET

AGES 13+
DCCOMICS.COM

CHAPTER 3

SUPERMAN TODAY

REMAKING THE MYTH

Superman—and his history—
were given a massive overhaul for the
1980s and beyond

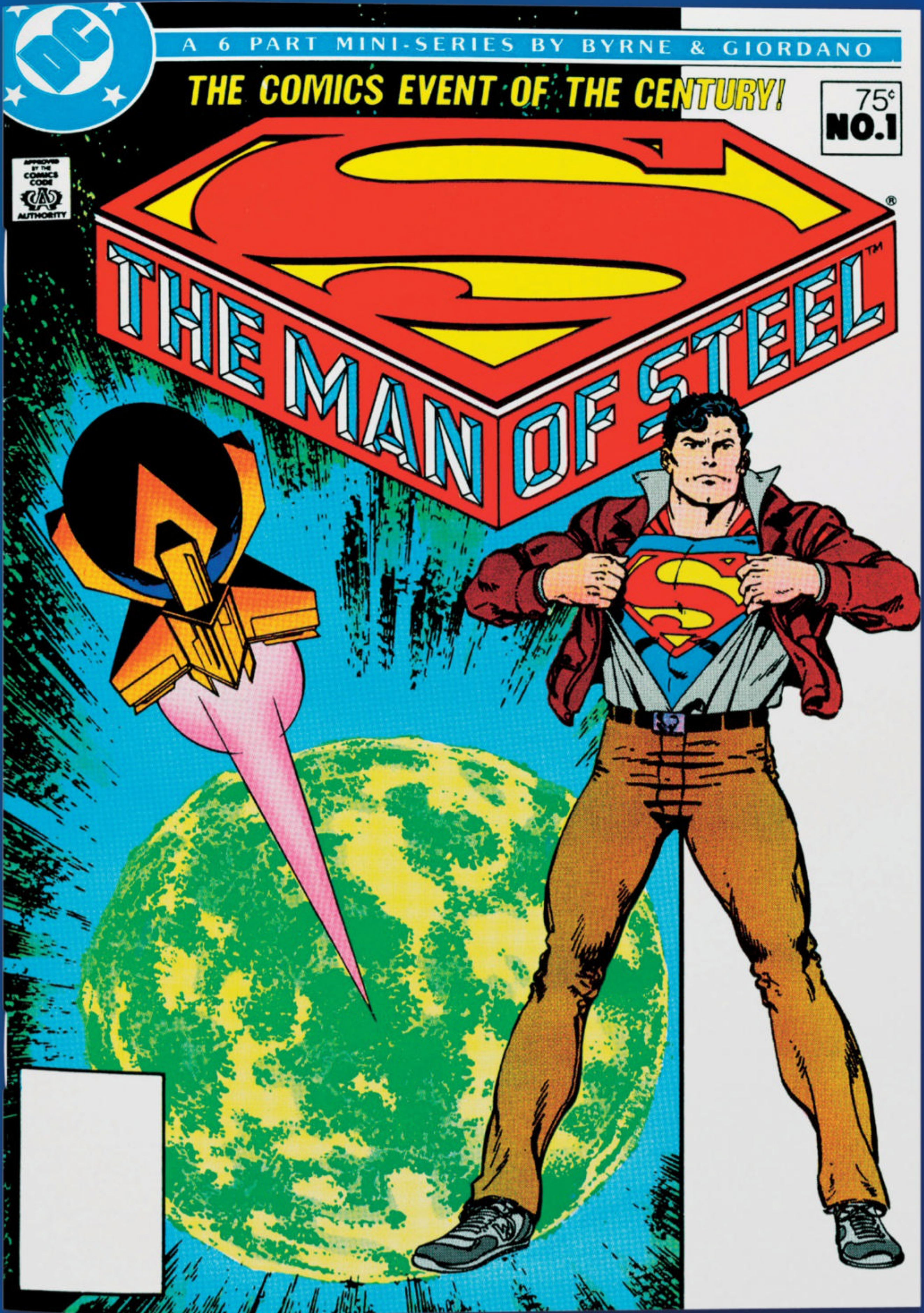
In the mid-1980s, Superman was still a merchandising powerhouse—there were action figures, posters, puzzles, T-shirts, Halloween costumes, lunchboxes, peanut butter and much more. But just as the Superman movie series faced a shrinking audience, so too did the Superman comic books. Readers perceived them as old-fashioned, dull and lacking in depth and characterization, with Superman himself considered too powerful and too flawless to be relatable. Marvel was now the No. 1 comic book company, with the X-Men and Spider-Man dominating the sales charts. In 1986, DC went on the offensive, giving its entire superhero line a major makeover, including the Superman titles.

Julius Schwartz, who had been the Superman editor for 15 years, stepped down, and longtime Superman artist Curt Swan was moved to other projects. DC recruited John Byrne, an artist/writer for Marvel with a large fan following, to remake Superman from the ground up. Byrne's run began with *The Man of Steel*, a six-issue miniseries published during the summer of 1986 that introduced a new version of Superman. From there, Byrne relaunched *Superman* with a new No. 1 issue and took over *Action Comics* with No. 584 (both dated January 1987). The original *Superman* series, retitled *The Adventures of Superman* starting with issue 424 (also cover dated January 1987), was assigned to writer Marv Wolfman and artist Jerry Ordway and tied in closely with Byrne's titles.

Byrne discarded Superman's entire history and started it over again. Among his most notable changes was his redesign of Krypton, which had previously been portrayed as a robust, art deco-style world right out of a 1930s Flash Gordon newspaper strip. Byrne's Krypton was cold, devoid of vitality and truly alien, evoking the feel of the Krypton from *Superman: The Movie*. Superman was once again the sole survivor of Krypton—no Supergirl, no Krypto, no bottle city of Kandor. Byrne also eliminated Superboy from Superman's history but kept his Earth parents, Jonathan and Martha Kent, alive—previously, both had died before Clark Kent became Superman. "That, to me, is probably the best thing that came out of the [restart]," editor Mike Carlin says. "It gave Superman a great sounding board, and it gave us the chance to show that Ma and Pa Kent are who actually made Superman. Their morals taught him, and you saw it play out."

Clark was no longer portrayed as timid—he played football in high school (his powers didn't fully kick in until adulthood) and became a successful author in

STEELING THE SHOW
John Byrne's 1986 six-part miniseries *The Man of Steel* introduced a new version of the superhero to the world.


A 6 PART MINI-SERIES BY BYRNE & GIORDANO
THE COMICS EVENT OF THE CENTURY!
75¢
NO.1
APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY
THE MAN OF STEEL

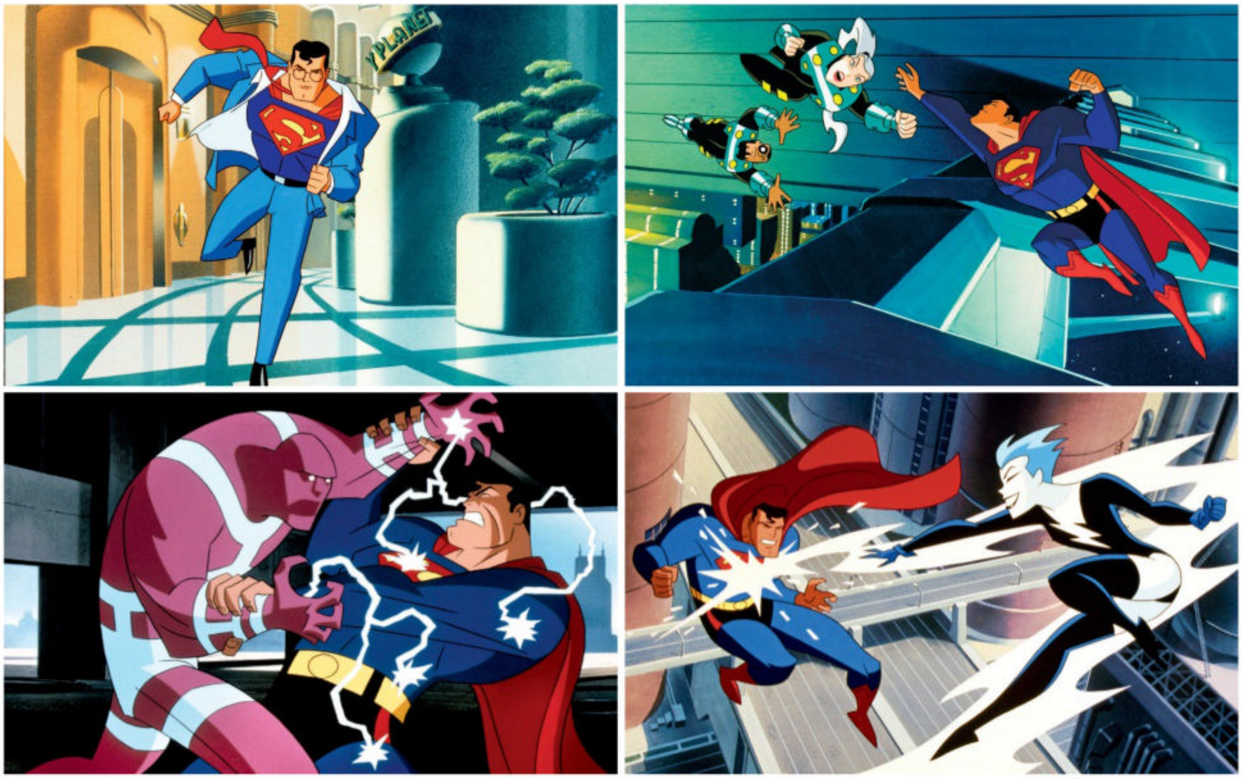
addition to working as a reporter for the *Daily Planet* (his stint as a TV newsman was erased entirely). As Denny O'Neil had done 15 years earlier, Byrne scaled back Superman's powers considerably, and he limited the amount of kryptonite on Earth to just one piece.

Lex Luthor was reconceived too, primarily by Wolfman. Instead of a brilliant scientist and criminal genius obsessed with killing Superman, Luthor was now a brilliant, fabulously wealthy businessman who presented himself as a benevolent philanthropist but was actually a corrupt, ruthless, cruel egomaniac who secretly controlled much of the crime in Metropolis. The new Luthor was the most powerful man in the city—until Superman came along, and therein lay the beginning of their conflict. It escalated when Superman discovered the depths of Luthor's villainy but could not prove it. "[Luthor] is so smart, he can get everything he wants done without once having a finger pointing at him," Wolfman explains. "And he can always send you off into tangents. In my mind, Luthor's superpower is his brain and he has to be able to outthink Superman, always be one step ahead. That's what frustrates Superman."

> **"[Luthor] is so smart, he can get everything he wants done without once having a finger pointing at him."**
>
> **—Marv Wolfman**

ADVENTURE TIME Teri Hatcher and Dean Cain starred in *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* (above).

ANIMATION STATION *Superman: The Animated Series* (opposite) aired on Kids' WB from 1996 to 2000 and relied on the restart.



Wolfman says the comics of this era took some cues from the Christopher Reeve movies without copying them directly. "I loved the first movie and I liked the second one," he says. "None of the films directly imposed themselves on my stories. But the movies allowed us to do the type of stories that I already liked—more down-to-earth, street-level. There could be more of a real love interest, and you could treat Superman in a slightly different way. You could play him more as a human being, which makes him more interesting. A lot of people find Superman very difficult because he has so many powers, and in my mind they're only concentrating on the 'super' and not the 'man.' [The restart] was a good excuse to start doing stories for an older audience—something more personal, something deeper. We could play off the problems that someone like him might have."

Longtime readers resented the changes. It didn't help that they were essentially being informed that the older stories they loved never happened. But the restart succeeded, attracting a sizable audience, many of whom were new readers, and increasing the sales to levels not seen in years—*The Man of Steel* No. 1 reportedly sold 200,000 copies, and the regular monthly *Superman* titles that followed performed well. "You didn't have to already know anything that had happened before," Carlin says. "You were let in on the ground floor." DC was fully committed to the new take on Superman, even after both Byrne and Wolfman departed within two years of the restart. Subsequent adaptations in other media drew heavily from this take, including a 1988 animated show on CBS (for which Wolfman served as story editor), the live-action *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, which aired on ABC from 1993 to 1997, *Superman: The Animated Series*, which aired on Kids' WB from 1996 to 2000, and *Smallville*, which aired on The WB (later The CW) from 2001 to 2011.

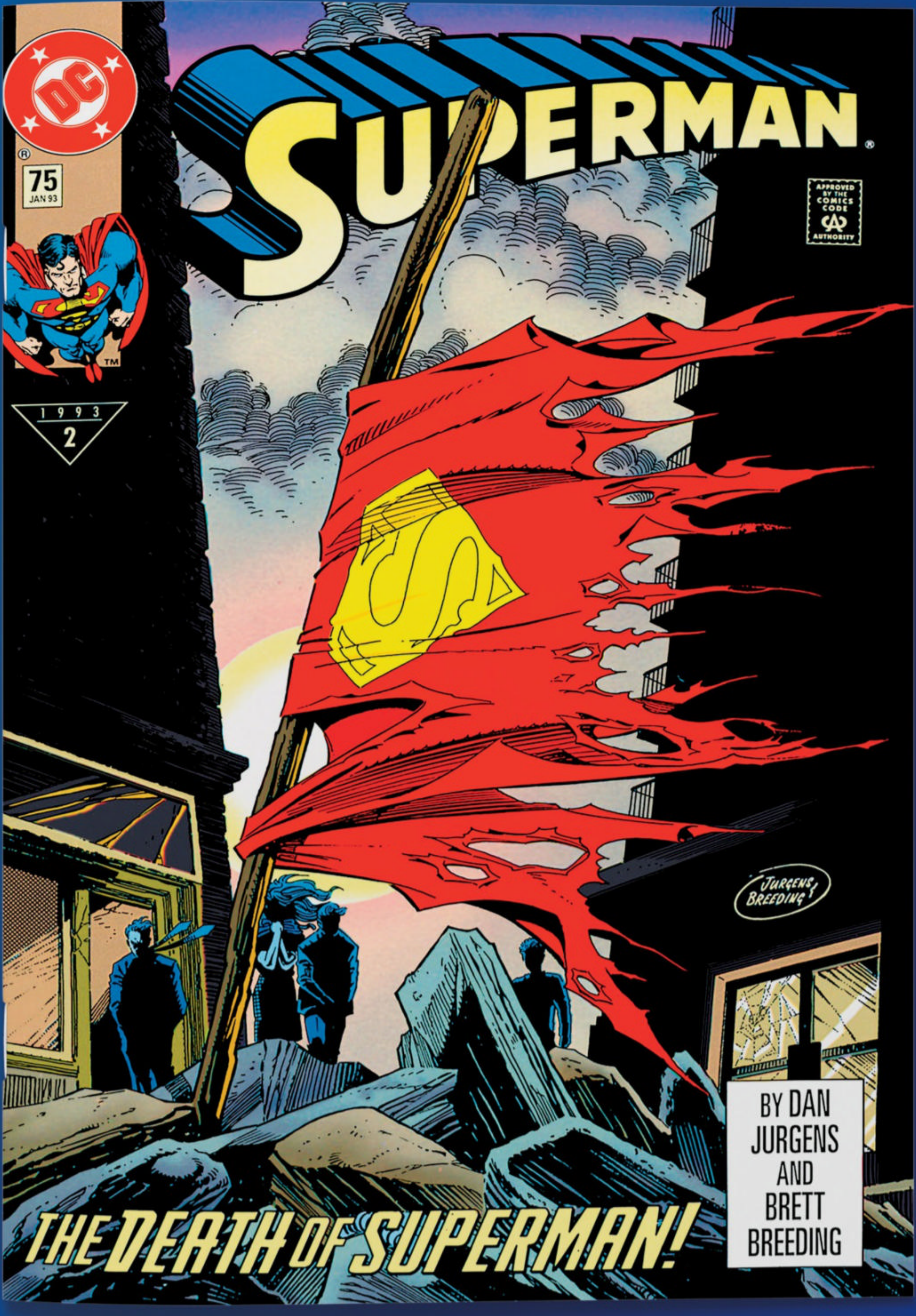
The "new" Superman reached a creative and commercial peak when, in late 1992, Carlin and his team of writers and artists launched a multipart storyline that ran through all four of the monthly Superman titles at the time (*Superman, Action Comics, The Adventures of Superman* and

> **“A lot of people find Superman very difficult because he has so many powers, and in my mind they’re only concentrating on the ‘super’ and not the ‘man.’”**
> **—Marv Wolfman**

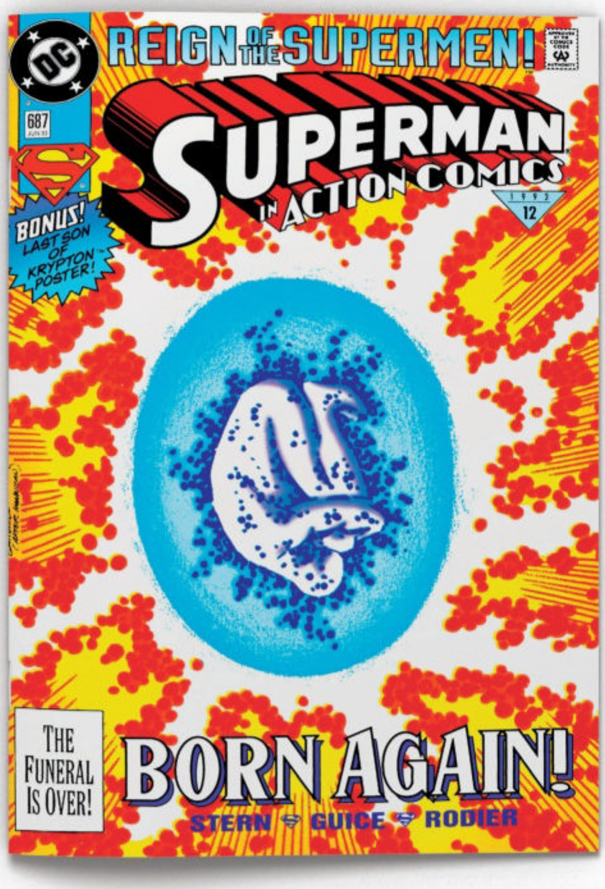
Superman: The Man of Steel). Spanning nearly a year, it was broken down into three acts—*The Death of Superman*, *Funeral for a Friend* and *Reign of the Supermen*—and presented Superman’s demise at the hands of a new enemy: a rampaging, superstrong monster called Doomsday. The heart of the story was how Superman’s supporting cast, and the world at large, coped with life after the loss of Earth’s greatest hero—before his eventual, inevitable resurrection.

“We realized we could do a story about Superman’s importance,” explains Dan Jurgens, who wrote and illustrated the issue in which Superman died (*Superman* No. 75, cover dated November 1992). “We were trying to do a cool Superman story and

SMALL WORLD
Smallville starred Tom Welling (right) as Clark Kent, pictured holding Michael Rosenbaum’s Lex Luthor.



DC
SUPERMAN
75
JAN 93
1993
2
APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY
JURGENS & BREEDING
THE DEATH OF SUPERMAN!
BY DAN JURGENS AND BRETT BREEDING



> “Superman was [seen as] the cornball, Boy Scout hero. We wanted to show people that there’s nothing wrong with being a good guy.”
>
> **—Mike Carlin**

LIFE AND DEATH *The Death of Superman* spanned all four of the monthly Superman titles at the time.

CHANCE OF REIGN Superman’s death and inevitable resurrection (above) sent sales skyrocketing.

make a big statement about the character.” As Carlin recalls, it was prompted by the huge popularity at the time of violent heroes and antiheroes like Wolverine, the Punisher and Spawn. Compared to them, Carlin says, “Superman was [seen as] the cornball, Boy Scout hero. We wanted to show people that there’s nothing wrong with being a good guy. Our way to do that was to take the good guy away and do months of stories where there was no Superman in the world. What did that mean to the world? The world was Metropolis, and Metropolis reflected the real world.”

Given the real-world response, it was clear there was still plenty of interest in, and affection for, Superman. His death received heavy media coverage, with commentators expressing shock and dismay. “What was cool about it,” Jurgens says, “is that in real life, there were columnists writing pieces about what Superman meant to them. ‘What does it mean that we no longer have a Superman in this world?’ ‘How cynical have we become?’ All that kind of stuff. We had this wonderful bit of fiction and reality just kind of interweaving.”

Sales skyrocketed. “It was the best-selling comic story, really comic *series*, of all time,” Carlin says. “We went on for, like, a year, selling a million a week. Just crazy. We were as surprised as anybody when the world gave a s**t about it.”

The entire storyline was adapted into a hardcover prose novel, *The Death and Life of Superman*, by Roger Stern, who was the regular writer of *Action Comics* at the time. Published in September 1993, just as the comic book storyline was ending, the novel spent more than a month on *The New York Times* Best Sellers list. Due to his deadlines, Stern found himself essentially putting the cart before the horse. “I was writing the denouement [for the comic book storyline] for *Action Comics* [No. 692, cover dated October 1993],” Stern says. “But I had to finish the novel first. So I wrote the ending in the novel and then back-adapted for the comic, which was really crazy.”

Having killed and resurrected Superman, the comic book team had told, arguably, the ultimate story featuring the Man of Steel. Now came an even more daunting challenge: continuing on in a way that would hold the audience they had built and keep Superman from being taken for granted, as he had been once before.

CHAPTER 3

SUPERMAN TODAY

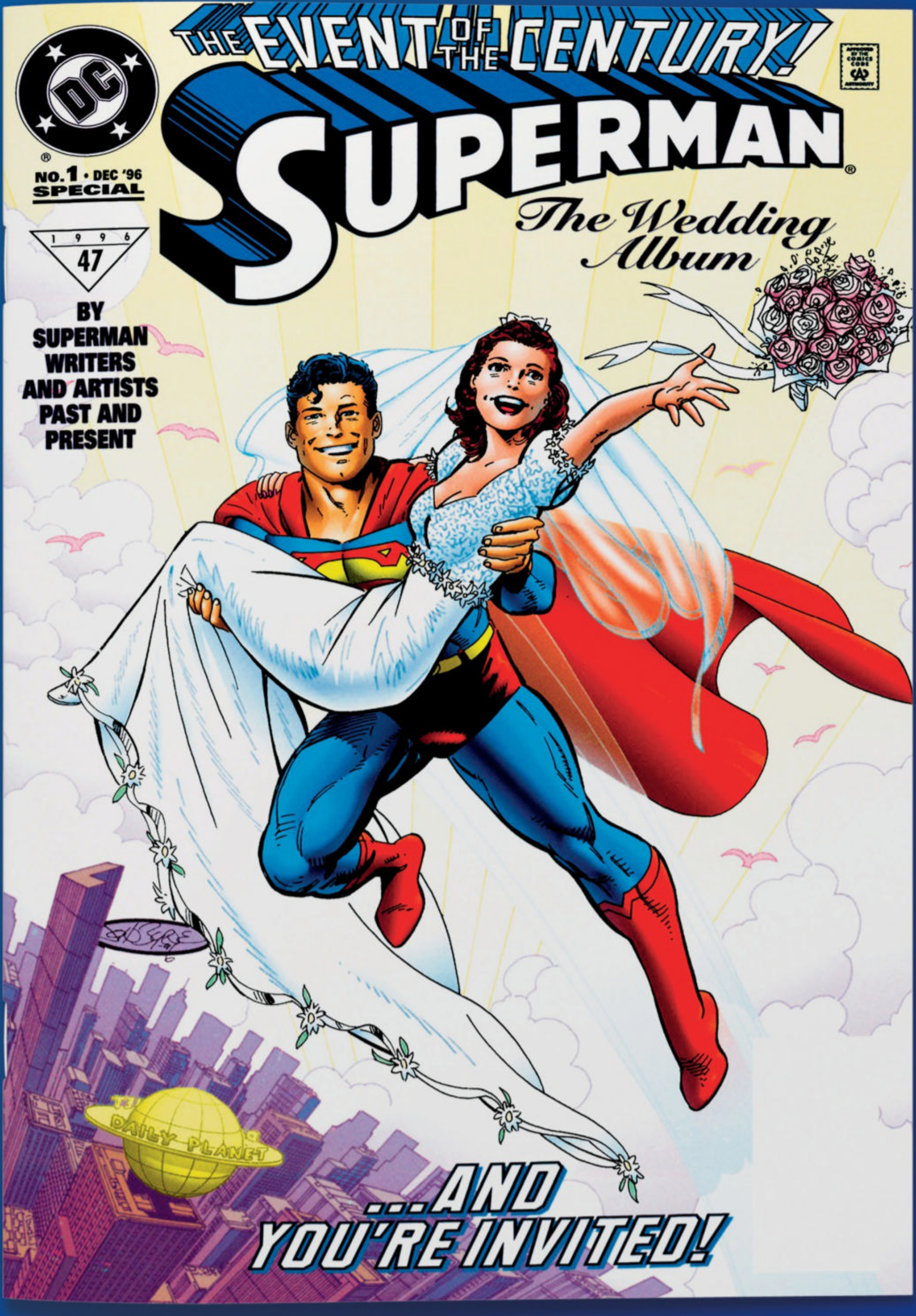
THE NEVER-ENDING BATTLE

Superman followed his resurrection with a lavish wedding—and a struggle to remain relevant

Superman's death and resurrection comprised a major event that saw sales success that would not be easy to duplicate—and the team at DC Comics was well aware of it. "Did we expect to ever top the death of Superman? Nope," editor Mike Carlin says. "Never once did my bosses come down and say, 'What are you going to do to top it?' Everybody knew that it was the peak, the thing that we would never achieve again on purpose. You can't set out to do that—it's catching lightning in a bottle."

But that did not mean that in its aftermath, there were no other monumental, attention-grabbing stories with long-term impact on the Man of Steel. Most notable was the wedding of Superman—in his Clark Kent identity—and Lois Lane, an event that transpired in the comics and on television simultaneously. The print version occurred in *Superman: The Wedding Album* (cover dated December 1996), a 96-page special issue by all of the writers and artists who were working on the regular Superman titles at the time. The TV version aired on Oct. 6, 1996, during the same week that the comic book went on sale. It was the third episode of the fourth season of *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, which starred Dean Cain as Clark/ Superman and Teri Hatcher as Lois. In the comics, the marriage had been in the works for years—Clark and Lois got engaged in *Superman* No. 50 (cover dated December 1990) and he revealed his identity to her in *Action Comics* No. 662 (cover dated February 1991). The wedding itself was originally intended for *Superman* No. 75, published in late 1992, but it was pushed back to accommodate the launch of the TV series. When it finally did happen, it was during a time when *Lois & Clark* was dropping in the ratings, and the event did nothing to improve the situation—the show was canceled at the end of the season, with some observers saying that

SAVE THE DATE
Clark Kent and Lois Lane's wedding happened in the comics (right) and on television simultaneously.


THE EVENT OF THE CENTURY!
DC
NO. 1 • DEC '96
SPECIAL
SUPERMAN
The Wedding Album
1 9 9 6
47
BY SUPERMAN WRITERS AND ARTISTS PAST AND PRESENT
THE DAILY PLANET
...AND YOU'RE INVITED!

the marriage was the final nail in the coffin, as all of the sexual tension and the will-they-or-won't-they dynamic that had been so integral to its initial success were gone.

The reaction to the marriage among comic book readers was mixed. Some appreciated seeing real progression and development in Superman's life and a deepening of his relationship with Lois after so many years. Others felt the marriage aged and domesticated the character too much, distancing him further from his target audience—namely kids—and making him come off more like a parental figure than an older brother. Plus, it was argued, the marriage closed off Superman—and Clark, for that matter—from becoming romantically involved with any other women, thus eliminating a key source of drama, intrigue and speculation—not to mention variety—from the series. Regardless, DC was committed to this new phase in Superman and Lois' life together, so the marriage remained in place.

> **"Superman had more than just married life to contend with. The rise of darker, more violent, grim-and-gritty heroes and antiheroes that had begun in the 1980s was in full swing by the mid-1990s."**

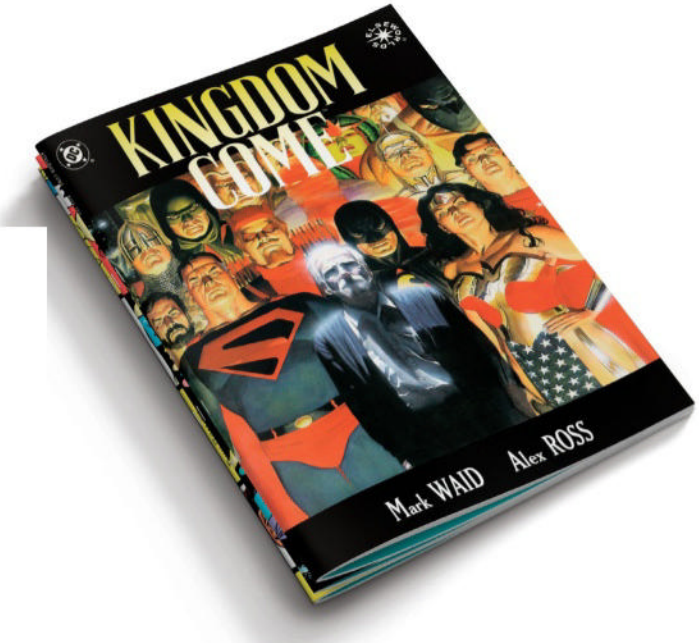
But Superman had more than just married life to contend with at the time. The rise of darker, more violent, grim-and-gritty heroes and antiheroes that had begun in the 1980s was in full swing by the mid-1990s. Spurred on by best-sellers like Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, both of which offered a more mature, more complex, more pessimistic take on the superhero genre, DC, Marvel, Image and other publishers put out numerous titles that followed suit. Fans ate it up, and Superman seemed to be in danger of being left behind.

Writer Mark Waid and illustrator Alex Ross addressed the matter directly in *Kingdom Come*, a 1996 four-issue limited series set several decades in the future, with Superman retired and living in solitude after the murder of Lois and many of his friends at the *Daily Planet*. The Justice League has been replaced by a new, more ruthless breed of superheroes, many of whom are reckless in the use of their powers and have no qualms about resorting to brutality—and even killing—in the name of justice. As the world edges closer to Armageddon, Superman emerges from his self-imposed exile, gathers some of his old allies—including Wonder Woman, the Flash and Green Lantern—and sets out to, as he puts it, "teach [the new generation] the meaning of truth and justice. Together, we will guide this new breed with wisdom … and, if necessary, with force. Above all, we will restore order. We will make things right again." Along the way, Superman is told by the most notorious of the new heroes, an irreverent—and popular—ruffian called Magog, "They were calling you old fashioned when I was a teenager. World's oldest boy scout … but you wouldn't change. You wouldn't get in step. You wouldn't flex with the times." As Waid acknowledges, "It was a not-terribly subtle meta-commentary on what the industry was going through."

Kingdom Come depicts a Superman who is fallible but unswerving in his commitment to correcting his mistakes and preserving all life—even the lives of his adversaries, no matter how dangerous they may be. The story immersed Superman in the trend that was threatening to make him seem obsolete, while celebrating and preserving what he had always been. This subject matter was explored again in *Action Comics* No. 775 (cover dated March 2001), which featured a story titled "What's So Funny About Truth, Justice, & the American Way?" written by Joe Kelly and illustrated by Doug Mahnke and Lee Bermejo. In it, Superman confronts a new, violent team of heroes called the Elite, who, in their determination to get the job done by any means necessary, cause as much death and destruction as the villains they take down. The Elite were a thinly disguised parody of *The Authority*, a successful superhero comic book series that launched in 1999 and was notable for its extreme approach to the genre, with more explicit depictions of sex and violence. In a final confrontation with the Elite in which he emerges victorious, Superman tells the team's leader, Manchester Black: "Anger is easy. Hate is easy. Vengeance and spite are easy. Lucky for you … and me … I don't like my heroes ugly and mean. Just don't believe in it."

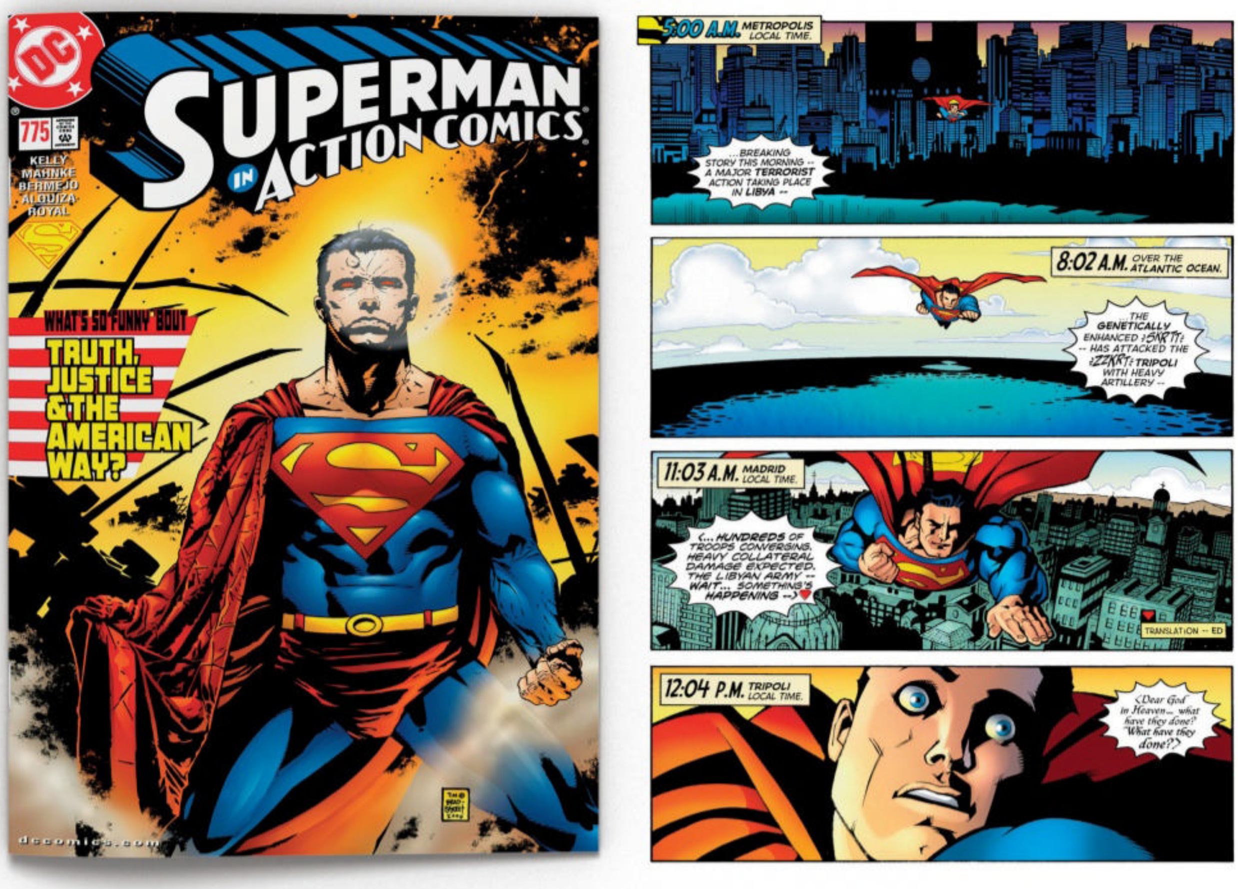
'TIL DEATH
Clark Kent's wedding in *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* (left) was seen as a death knell for the show.

INDUSTRY INSIDER
Kingdom Come (below) was a "not-terribly subtle meta-commentary" on the comics industry.



Both *Kingdom Come* and *Action Comics* No. 775 were widely acclaimed, with *Kingdom Come* receiving several Eisner awards, including one for Best Finite Series/Limited Series. "I think *Kingdom Come* helped put Superman back on the map in a lot of ways that he [hadn't been in a while]," Waid says, adding that he thinks the message he was trying to convey—that Superman remained as vital, valid and relevant as ever—got through, because "we're still talking about that story more than 20 years later."

> “It was not so much a question of *if* Superman would be changed to remain vital and relevant for modern audiences, but *when* and *how*.”


SUPERMAN IN ACTION COMICS
775
KELLY
MAHNKE
BERMEJO
ALQUIZA
ROYAL
WHAT'S SO FUNNY 'BOUT TRUTH, JUSTICE & THE AMERICAN WAY?
dccomics.com
5:00 A.M. METROPOLIS LOCAL TIME.
...BREAKING STORY THIS MORNING -- A MAJOR TERRORIST ACTION TAKING PLACE IN LIBYA --
8:02 A.M. OVER THE ATLANTIC OCEAN.
...THE GENETICALLY ENHANCED ¡SKRTT! -- HAS ATTACKED THE ¡ZZKRT! TRIPOLI WITH HEAVY ARTILLERY --
11:03 A.M. MADRID LOCAL TIME.
<... HUNDREDS OF TROOPS CONVERGING. HEAVY COLLATERAL DAMAGE EXPECTED. THE LIBYAN ARMY -- WAIT... SOMETHING'S HAPPENING -->
TRANSLATION -- ED
12:04 P.M. TRIPOLI LOCAL TIME.
<Dear God in Heaven... what have they done? What have they done?>

Still, as the 20th century made way for the 21st, the prevailing attitude toward Superman seemed to be that while he was certainly a comic book mainstay, he was not a must-read. While the case had been made that the Man of Steel and his brand of heroism still mattered, that message, even as *Smallville* was enjoying an impressive 10-season run on television, did not necessarily translate into higher sales figures. Superman was no longer the top-selling character at DC; that slot had long since been taken over by Batman.

A big-screen comeback in 2006 did not help matters. *Superman Returns,* directed by Bryan Singer and starring newcomer Brandon Routh as Superman/Clark, Kate Bosworth as Lois and Kevin Spacey as Lex Luthor, tried to pick up where the Christopher Reeve movies—specifically the first two—had left off. It received generally positive reviews but was nonetheless considered too

ELITE DANGEROUS
Action Comics No. 775 (above) pits Superman against a violent team of heroes called the Elite.

COMEBACK KID
Newcomer Brandon Routh (right) starred as Superman/Clark Kent in 2006’s *Superman Returns.*

T77-9SM
Air Conditioned

“**Superman was no longer the top-selling character at DC; that slot had long since been taken over by Batman.**”

beholden to, and derivative of, the Reeve movies while failing to capture their charm, wit and sense of fun. With a budget of $232 million, *Superman Returns* earned $391 million worldwide and was deemed a disappointment. “[It] didn’t quite work as a film in the way that we wanted it to,” Warner Bros. Pictures Group president Jeff Robinov said in 2008. “It didn’t position the character the way he needed to be positioned.” A planned sequel was canceled.

Furthermore, the perception of Superman as a perfect, uncomplicated, all-powerful goody two-shoes persisted within the comic book industry. Many top writers felt that he was too difficult for them to work on because they could not relate to him or see how he could be suitably challenged, other than with that old cliched standby, kryptonite. “To me, that’s kind of a cop-out,” Mike Carlin says. “It means you’re not thinking about it, you’re not putting yourself into the character’s shoes.” The key, he explains, is to “put all your attention into, ‘What would it be like if I were Superman and I didn’t want to just do selfish things?’”

Regardless, it eventually became clear that it was not so much a question of *if* Superman would be changed to remain vital and relevant for modern audiences, but *when* and *how*.

HEAVY LOAD
Brandon Routh (left) in 2006’s *Superman Returns*. A planned sequel was canceled.

BEHIND THE SCENES
Director Bryan Singer (above, right) on the set of *Superman Returns*. The film earned $391 million worldwide.

CHAPTER 3

SUPERMAN TODAY

THE HERO FOR HOPE

Why we need Superman now, more than ever

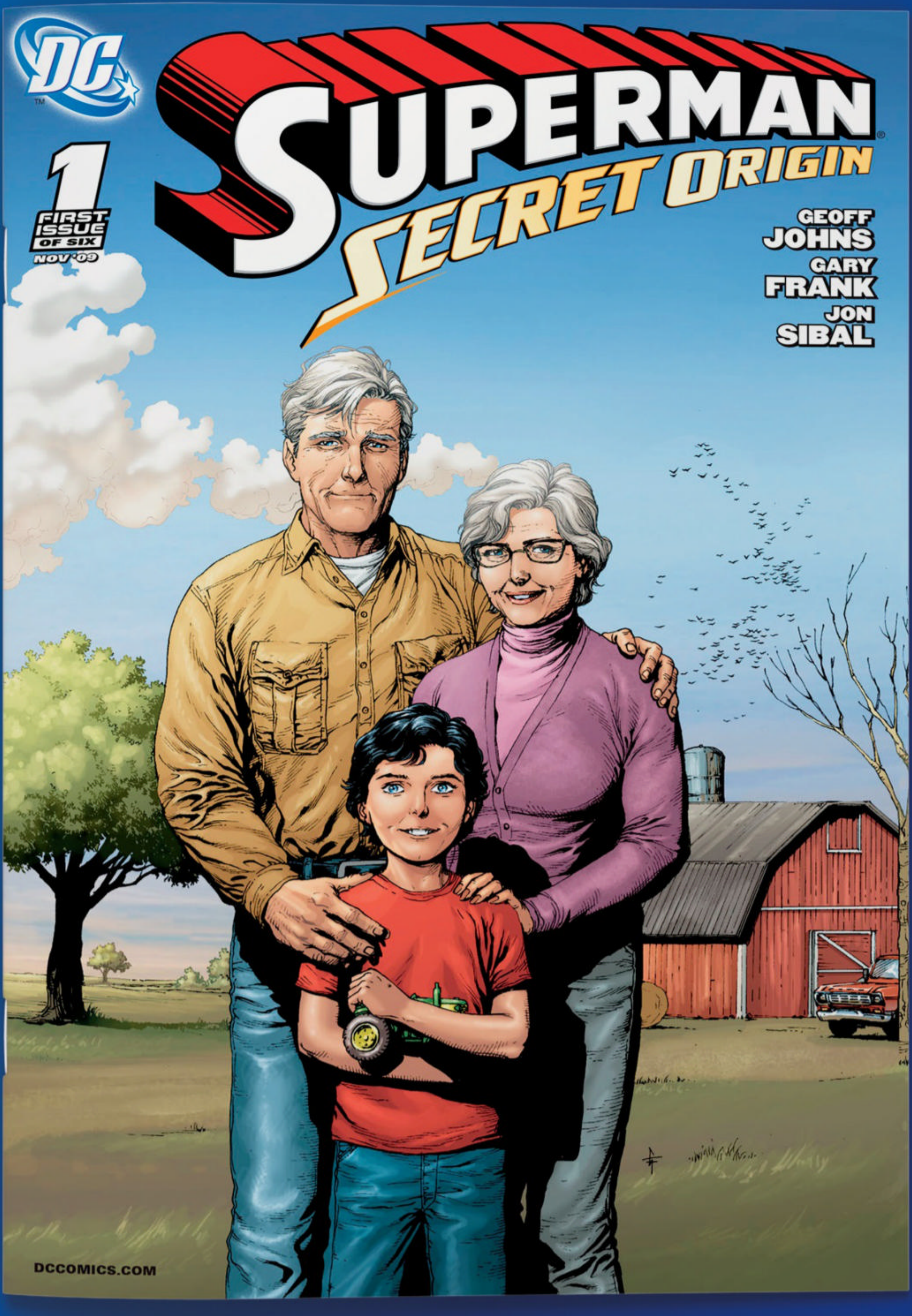
Since 2000, DC Comics—in its ongoing efforts to keep Superman current—has launched numerous restarts of the character, each one overriding the version that came before it. Writer Mark Waid and artist Leinil Francis Yu teamed up to produce *Superman: Birthright,* a 12-issue limited series launched in 2003 that erased much of what had been established in John Byrne's *Man of Steel* and the 15-plus years of continuity that sprang from it. But in 2009, DC invalidated *Birthright* with the publication of *Superman: Secret Origin,* a six-issue series written by Geoff Johns and illustrated by Gary Frank that eliminated some bits of the character's history while restoring others, including some of Byrne's contributions.

More retellings of Superman's origin and early days followed, all contradicting one another with significantly different takes on Krypton, Clark Kent's youth, his debut as Superman and his first encounters with Lois, Luthor and kryptonite. Readers could be forgiven for not being sure which version actually "counted" in the "official" canon. Furthermore, DC initiated another major restart of its entire comic book line in 2011, making Superman younger and erasing his marriage to Lois, establishing that it never happened. But, within four years, DC backtracked from this version and restored the previous one, along with the marriage—and now Superman and Lois had a 10-year-old son named Jon. Creative freedom is one thing. But it was hard not to feel that the company was unsure of what to do with its flagship character.

In the opinion of Elliot S! Maggin—whose Superman writing credits extended beyond comics to the 1978 best-selling novel *Superman: Last Son of Krypton,* its 1981 follow-up *Miracle Monday* and the 1998 novelization of *Kingdom Come*—all of the restarts since 1986 were unnecessary. "When you've got 80, 90 years of preface, there's no reason to go somewhere else," he says. "[Restarts] are good stunts, and they'll always sell, but then they peter out. You do a [restart] when you're not interested enough to do the research—if there's that much wealth of backstory material, why start over again as if it didn't happen? If you want to keep Superman vital, hire people who love the character."

Waid, who cites Maggin as one of his biggest influences, also questions the need for restarts. "Superman will lose his way once in a while because he will not be cared for by creators who love him," he says. "And every once in a while, when needed, someone who loves Superman will

SUPER SECRET
The six-issue *Superman: Secret Origin* series invalidated 2003's *Superman: Birthright.*


DC
SUPERMAN
SECRET ORIGIN
1
FIRST ISSUE OF SIX
NOV '09
GEOFF JOHNS
GARY FRANK
JON SIBAL
DCCOMICS.COM

STEEL YOURSELF
There was little hope on display in 2013's *Man of Steel* (above), directed by Zack Snyder.

SNYDER CUT
Zack Snyder (right) made controversial choices in his movies, including having Superman kill an enemy.

> **"If there's that much wealth of backstory material, why start over again as if it didn't happen? If you want to keep Superman vital, hire people who love the character."**
>
> **—Elliot S! Maggin**

step up and say, 'Here's why I love Superman, and I will show you why I love Superman and you will love him too.'"

On the movie front, a new take on Superman—a darker, more serious one—took shape in 2013's *Man of Steel* and its 2016 sequel, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice,* both directed by Zack Snyder and starring Henry Cavill. While these films established Superman's distinctive "S" emblem as a Kryptonian symbol for hope—an idea introduced by Waid in *Birthright*—there was little hope on display. Snyder's Superman was mostly grim and conflicted about his role and responsibilities as a superhero, in large part because of the guidance given to him by his adoptive parents, who had previously always been portrayed as the source and inspiration for Clark's selflessness and sense of duty. But in *Man of Steel,* Jonathan Kent (Kevin Costner) suggests to young Clark that it might have been wiser to let his classmates drown in a school-bus accident rather than save them and risk revealing his superpowers. Jonathan even convinces Clark to let him die in a tornado to protect that secret. In *Batman v Superman,* Martha Kent (Diane Lane) tells Clark, "I never wanted this world to have you. Be their hero, Clark. Be their monument, be their angel, be anything they need you to be—or be none of it. You don't owe this world a thing. You never did." Most controversially, this Superman killed his enemy, the Kryptonian renegade General Zod, as Zod threatened the lives of innocent bystanders.

"Zack Snyder is an Ayn Rand freak," Maggin says. "You don't do superheroes if you're an Ayn Rand freak and you don't believe in generosity and charity. And you don't have Superman kill somebody. Ever."

"Superman never kills, that's absolutely a 'no,'" Ilya Salkind, producer of the first three Christopher Reeve *Superman* movies, says. "That was a big mistake."

In 2016, Snyder defended the decision to have Superman kill. "Superman has killed Zod so many times in the comic books that it's like, not even a thing," he said. "It really has a lot to do, I think, with the way people have sort of come to visualize Superman purely from the cinematic point of view, what they learned from the [old] movies. And because I'm a comic book fan, that's really, like, a version of the character that's not consistent with the canon." It is true that Superman killed a version of Zod in one story, written and illustrated by Byrne and published in *Superman* No. 22 (cover dated October 1988), but it was established as the only time in the continuity that he ever killed, and it caused him to swear to never take another life.

Warner Bros. executives apparently concluded that the cinematic Man of Steel had drifted too far off-model. A course correction was made with his next appearance, the theatrical version of 2017's *Justice League*. Directed by Snyder but reworked significantly in post-production by Joss Whedon, the film emphasized Cavill's Superman as a far more upbeat, optimistic and friendly character. (These qualities were mostly absent in Snyder's cut of the film, which was released in 2021.)

A kinder, gentler Superman, one that was seemingly a refutation of Snyder's take, could be found on television, played by Tyler Hoechlin since 2016, first in the CW's *Supergirl* and most recently in

Superman & Lois, which premiered in 2021. From his first moments on screen, Hoechlin's Superman has exuded benevolence, optimism and faith in the basic goodness and decency of humankind. He's also the first Superman outside of the comics to be a parent—on *Superman & Lois,* Clark and Lois (Elizabeth Tulloch) are married and have twin teenage sons, Jordan (Alex Garfin) and Jonathan (Jordan Elsass, replaced by Michael Bishop in season 3).

The comic books had already moved in that direction, to some extent. In 2019, Superman and Lois' son, Jon, was aged up to 17 and has since followed in his father's footsteps, donning a similar costume and starring in his own series, *Superman: Son of Kal-El,* which launched in 2021 and ran for 18 issues, followed by a six-issue series in 2023, *Adventures of Superman: Jon Kent.* In 2021, Jon also came out as bisexual, part of an effort by DC to reach a wider audience and promote inclusivity and diversity.

Still, Batman currently stands as DC's top-selling and most popular character—a hero mired in darkness, fueled by vengeance and focused on punishing the guilty, unhampered by "the system." He is a far cry from the superpowered being from Krypton who projects a belief in the inherent goodness of each and every person. Perhaps audiences have gravitated toward Batman because

> **"You don't do superheroes if you're an Ayn Rand freak and you don't believe in generosity and charity. And you don't have Superman kill somebody. Ever."**
>
> **—Elliot S! Maggin**

DARKEST DAWN
From left: Henry Cavill, Ben Affleck and Zack Snyder on the set of 2016's *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice.*

SUPERMAN
SON OF KAL-EL
TAYLOR
TIMMS
ELTAEB
DC
1
ALL IN FULL COLOR
22 PAGES OF ACTION!
THE BEGINNING STORY OF THE DARING EXPLOITS OF THE 21st CENTURY
SUPERMAN
AGES 13+
DCCOMICS.COM
DC
16
TAYLOR
TORMEY
COLEMAN
FAJARDO JR.
AGES 13+
DC.COM

of the current time in which we live, with deeply felt division, anger and distrust. So where does that leave Superman, who is often dismissed as an uncomplicated, corny "boy scout"?

As far as writer/artist Dan Jurgens is concerned, "Superman is who we want to be and Batman is who we are. That, to me, is the biggest difference between the two." He adds, "If Superman is regarded as corny, are we really commenting on Superman, or are we commenting on ourselves?"

"Calling Superman a 'Boy Scout' as a putdown is ridiculous anyway," writer Marv Wolfman says. "Being a boy scout is about being a good citizen and a good person. If you're making fun of it, it's because something's wrong with you, not because something's wrong with the concept."

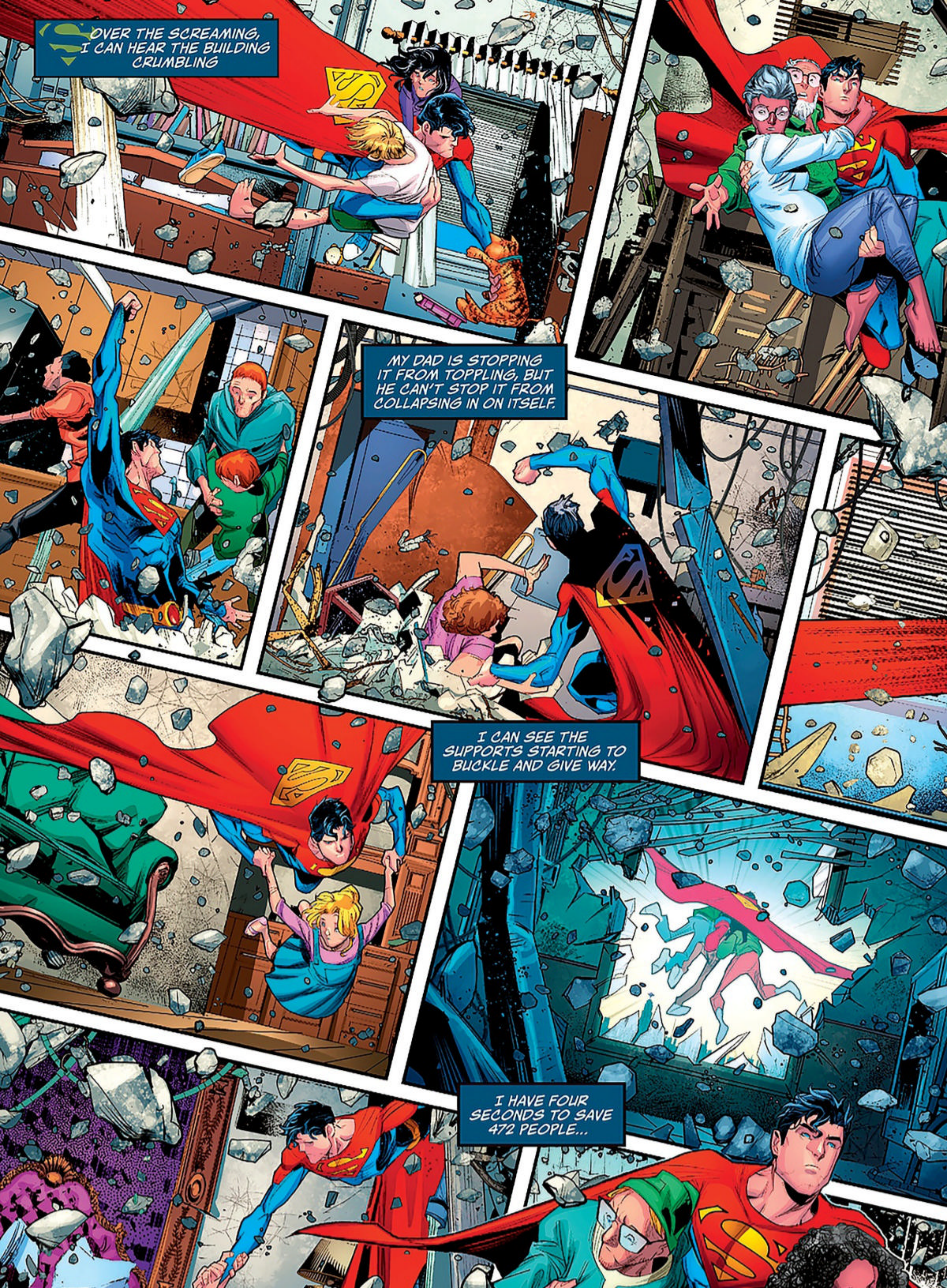
Superman: The Movie director Richard Donner said in 2017 that Superman, and what he represents, could not be more important during troubled times. "It's a different world today," Donner said. "It's very dark and bleak and somewhat 'unhopeful.' ... Where are you, Superman, when we need you?"

One can only speculate that Superman's current corporate owner, Warner Discovery, sees that need as it recommits to the character's movie franchise, and is aware of the many articles, YouTube videos and social media posts—and comments from Henry Cavill himself—calling for a return to a Superman that embodies hope, optimism and joy. "Those three things are essential," Cavill told *Entertainment Tonight* in 2022.

Since 1938, there have been thousands of stories about Superman, spanning comic books, newspaper strips, animation, film, television, radio, novels and more, with countless more to come. It may well be that Superman's best days are ahead of him. If that notion seems too hopeful, just remember: Hope is what Superman is all about.

LIKE FATHER
Superman: Son of Kal-El starred Clark Kent's son, Jon, as a teenager following in his father's footsteps.

SON SHINE
Superman has had one son, twin boys and no kids at all in various versions of his story in comics and on TV.


OVER THE SCREAMING, I CAN HEAR THE BUILDING CRUMBLING
MY DAD IS STOPPING IT FROM TOPPLING, BUT HE CAN'T STOP IT FROM COLLAPSING IN ON ITSELF.
I CAN SEE THE SUPPORTS STARTING TO BUCKLE AND GIVE WAY.
I HAVE FOUR SECONDS TO SAVE 472 PEOPLE...

CREDITS

EDITORIAL DIRECTION BY
10TEN MEDIA, LLC

MANAGING EDITOR
Vickie An

CREATIVE DIRECTOR
Ian Knowles

EXECUTIVE EDITORS
Bob Der, Scott Gramling

ART DIRECTOR
Crhistian Rodriguez

PRODUCTION EDITOR
Corinne Cummings

SENIOR EDITOR
Monica Riese

WRITER
Glenn Greenberg

RESEARCH EDITOR
Christina Lee

A360 MEDIA

PRESIDENT & CHIEF MEDIA OFFICER
Doug Olson

EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
Eric Szegda

EVP, CHIEF REVENUE OFFICER & GROUP PUBLISHER
Neil Goldstein
ngoldstein@a360media.com

SENIOR VICE PRESIDENTS
Ben Harris
Sebastian Raatz

VICE PRESIDENTS
Holly Oakes
Tom Maloney
Brian Theveny

CONSUMER MARKETING DIRECTOR
Melanie Piselli

CIRCULATION MANAGER
Bill Fiakos

Published by A360 Media. All rights reserved.
Reproduction in whole or in part without prior permission of the publisher is prohibited. Printed in the U.S.A.

PHOTO CREDITS

Cover: BFA/Alamy Stock Photo; P3: Warner Bros/Kobal/Shutterstock; P4-5: Gs/AP/Shutterstock; P6: Parkin Songmor/Moment/Getty Images; P7: Warner Bros/DC Comics/Kobal/Shutterstock ; P8: Parkin Songmor/Moment/Getty Images; P9: No credit; P11: Zuri Swimmer/Alamy Stock Photo; P12: Bettmann/Getty Images; P13: No credit; P14-15: Martha Holmes/The LIFE Picture Collection/Shutterstock; P16-18: No credit (3); P19: Corbis/Getty Images; P21: Uncredited/AP/Shutterstock; P22: CBS/Getty Images; P23: No credit (12); P24-25: Everett/Shutterstock; P26-27: No credit (2); P28-29: Steve Schapiro/Corbis/Getty Images; P31: Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images; P32-33: Columbia Pictures/Getty Images; P34-37: LMPC/Getty Images (3); P38: Hulton Archive/Courtesy of Getty Images; Warner Brothers/Getty Images (2); P39: CBS Photo Archive/Getty Images; P40: Parkin Songmor/Moment/Getty Images; P41-48: No credit (6); P49: Matt Carasella/Patrick McMullan/Getty Images; P50: Bettmann/Getty Images; P51-53: No credit (2); P54: Matthew Simmons/Getty Images; Michael Bezjian/Getty Images for Nylon; Warner Bros/DC Comics/Kobal/Shutterstock (2); P55-56: No credit (2); P57: Mel Melcon/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images; P58-59: Jones/Evening Standard/Hulton Archive/Getty Images; P60-61: Steve Schapiro/Corbis/Getty Images; P63: Bettmann/Getty Images; P64: Central Press/Getty Images; P65: Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images; Warner Bros/DC Comics/Kobal/Shutterstock (2); P66: Moviestore/Shutterstock; Warner Bros/DC Comics/Kobal/Shutterstock; P67: Courtesy Everett Collection; P68-69: Moviestore/Shutterstock; P70: ©Warner Brothers/courtesy Everett Collection; P71: Moviestore/Shutterstock (2); Cannon/DC Comics/Kobal/Shutterstock (2); P72: Parkin Songmor/Moment/Getty Images; P73-75: No credit (2); P76: Warner Bros TV/Kobal/Shutterstock; P77-78: Warner Bros./courtesy Everett Collection (5); P78-79: RGR Collection/Alamy Stock Photo; P80-83: No credit (3); P84: Warner Bros./courtesy Everett Collection; P85-86: No credit (3); P87-89: Warner Bros/DC Comics/Kobal/Shutterstock (3); P91: No credit; P92: Warner Bros/Kobal/Shutterstock (3); P93: Kimimasa Mayama/EPA/Shutterstock; P94-95: Warner Bros/DC Comics/Kobal/Shutterstock; P96-97: No credit (2); Back Cover: Hulton Archive/Getty Images

THE STORY OF

SUPERMAN

THE STORY OF SUPERMAN

ZIPPING AROUND SINCE 1938, SUPERMAN IS THE FIRST COMIC BOOK SUPERHERO, THE TEMPLATE FOR ALL COSTUMED CRIME FIGHTERS AND ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL POP-CULTURE ICONS OF ALL TIME.